

# The Outer Circle

Book Three of the Counterpoint Trilogy

D. R. Bell

*The Outer Circle* is the third book in *The Counterpoint Trilogy*. The first two books of the trilogy, *The Metronome* and its sequel *The Great Game*, are standalone novels, with only a minor overlap between the characters. *The Outer Circle* brings together the strands and the heroes of the earlier books into a conclusion of their journeys.

*The Outer Circle*

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2015 by D. R. Bell.

This book is intended for personal use only, and may not be reproduced, transmitted or redistributed in any way without the express written consent of the author. You can contact the author at [drbellbooks.com](http://drbellbooks.com) or at [drbell2022@gmail.com](mailto:drbell2022@gmail.com).

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed in it are the work of author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, events or entities is coincidental and not intended by the author.

*“Of all passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.”*

C. S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*

*The job of the writer is to make revolution irresistible.*

Toni Cade Bambara

*Freedom is participation in power.*

Marcus Tullius Cicero

# CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>MARCH 2024 .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>JUNE 2024.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>JULY 2024.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>AUGUST 2024 .....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>FEBRUARY 2025 .....</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>COMMENTARY .....</b>	<b>282</b>
<b>MAIN CHARACTERS OF THE TRILOGY.....</b>	<b>292</b>

## **PREFACE**

*The Outer Circle* is the last book in the *Counterpoint Trilogy*, following *The Metronome* and *The Great Game*. While *The Metronome* and *The Great Game* were standalone books with little overlap between the characters, *The Outer Circle* brings together the characters of the two earlier novels in the story's conclusion.

The novel is set in 2024, two years after the conclusion of *The Great Game*. The United States, China, and Russia are locked in a geopolitical struggle, which serves as a backdrop for the U.S. Presidential elections.

What will the world look like in ten years? I can't tell you with any degree of certainty. We are witnessing simultaneous yet contradictory trends: centralization vs. localization, ever-bigger "too big to fail" institutions vs. individual-empowering sharing services, global interconnection vs. fragmentation, unprecedented access to information vs. a continuing loss of privacy, American supremacy vs. the rise of China. Technologies such as 3D printing, robotics, drones, and cryptocurrencies are disrupting the existing order. Now, these trends coexist. Eventually, they will collide. When, how and with what outcome—that is the question.

Those who read *The Metronome* and *The Great Game* know that they have been intended as more than pure entertainment. What's shown here is not a dystopian world but one where these trends have been extended even further. How would these trends resolve themselves? What is presented here is one possible scenario. Some parts of it are tongue-in-cheek; most are serious. I am sure the future will not look exactly the way it's described here. But perhaps some parts of it will.

The trilogy encompasses eighty-four years, from 1941 to 2025, with many different characters carrying difficult names. If you have not read *The Metronome* and/or *The Great Game* and are struggling to make sense of who's who, there is a brief guide to the main characters at the end of this book.

**MARCH 2024**

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jennifer woke up from a gasping sound on her right. Jeff was fighting for air in his sleep, again. *This crusade is going to kill him.* She moved her hand to shake her husband, but then gently placed it on his chest instead. This had been a frequent occurrence over the past hundreds nights: shallow breathing, then gasping and desperately sucking the air in. She would wake him up, he'd apologize, wouldn't be able to go back to sleep, dark circles under his eyes in the morning. Jennifer lightly moved her hand, trying to restart his breathing without interrupting Jeff's sleep.

It didn't used to be like this. Back in 2007, when they met and fell in love, he was a sound sleeper. She would meld herself into his back and take comfort in his calm, measured breathing. It relaxed her and allowed her to fall asleep as well. After her father was killed in 2006, she had suffered from daily nightmares. She'd never believed the official version of Pavel Rostin committing suicide. And then a stranger appeared out of nowhere and claimed that her father saved him from a life-long imprisonment and likely paid for this with his life. Jeff also did not believe in her father's suicide. It was that belief that first bound them together.

The nightmares returned with the first threat on Jeff's life. That was when his night gasping started as well. As the threats mounted, they sent their teenage daughter to live with Jennifer's mother and grandfather. Jeff refused bodyguards, so there were only two of them in the house at night. She was worried he might suffer a heart attack during one of these episodes and tried to get Jeff to buy an experimental device that would inject the plasminogen activator when detecting the symptoms. Jeff declined, partly due to the cost, but agreed to wear a basic monitoring bracelet.

Jeff's gasping subsided and he resumed a semblance of normal breathing. Jennifer waited a few minutes, her hand still on his chest, then got up. No point in lying in bed with her eyes wide open. The clock guiltily reminded her it was past one in the morning. She went

to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and peeked through the blinds. A familiar dark silhouette of an older Jeep was visible thirty yards away. A few months ago they noticed a suspicious car with two men parked across the street late at night. Jennifer called the police. To everyone's embarrassment, the men turned out to be Jeff's followers that voluntarily decided to watch the house. Jeff tried protesting, to no avail. Jennifer became used to people watching after them, trying to ensure their safety.

Having detected her presence, the refrigerator annoyingly beeped and said in a stern female voice:

"The milk is past its due date. You are down to three eggs and one apple. Would you like to place a delivery order with the Vons supermarket? Eggs at Vons are on sale..."

"No!" whispered Jennifer angrily and the fridge shut up. *I have to figure out how to re-program the damn thing.*

As she often did in times of insomnia, Jennifer reached for her grandfather's war diary, the one that Father brought from St. Petersburg eighteen years ago, just before his death. She had copies made, in Russian and in English. Jennifer knew every word by heart, but she still found strength and comfort in turning to the diary. She went to the *31 December 1941* entry. "Hope is everything," she read out loud.

*Peredelkino, 13 miles southwest of Moscow, Russia*

General Yuriy Shelkov threw more cold water on the hot stones, gently lashed himself with a *venik* of birch branches, and contentedly relaxed in the wet steam of his private *banya*. As the Chief of General Staff and the First Deputy Minister of Defense, he enjoyed the status and privileges commensurate with his position but without the pressure of being the Minister. At sixty-seven, this suited him just fine. On weekends, he escaped to this luxurious *dacha* that he'd purchased four years ago. The general loved pleasant solitary walks in the surrounding pine forest, with his bodyguards keeping a respectful but safe distance. He left his wife at home so that a bodyguard could drive back to Moscow and fetch the general's thirty-something mistress, Zinaida.

He heard a noise from the dressing room—Zinaida must be here early. In a minute, her naked contour would show up in the dense steam. The door opened and a figure appeared. Shelkov smiled, his groin tightening in anticipation.

“*Dobryi den, General,*” a decidedly male voice greeted him.

Shelkov jumped up. “Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?”

A tall, balding man in his forties with a towel wrapped around his waist parted the cloud of steam and sat on the bench.

“Please sit down, General. No need to call the bodyguard. He is the one who let me in. I just want to talk.”

“Who are you?” demanded Shelkov again. He was used to commanding people and having them answer his questions.

“You can call me Arkady, but my name is not relevant. What is relevant is who I work for, what I know, and what I can do with that knowledge. Please, sit down, you are making me nervous hovering like this.”

Shelkov became aware of his nakedness, grabbed the towel he'd been sitting on, wrapped it around his waist and sat as far away from the tall man as the bench allowed.

“Thank you,” continued the man. “To quickly put aside any doubts, we know exactly how much money you made in the 2019 financial crisis. I can tell you the account number in the Commercant bank you used under your nephew’s name, the transactions in your sister’s account, and many more. Even after purchasing this *dacha*, you still ended up stashing away a very nice amount in a couple of Swiss banks.”

“So what? Everyone was doing this. Get out!”

“Yes, but when the story of the 2019 profiteering broke out in 2022 and caused a lot of popular anger, President Mosin made a point of going after some high-level speculators that were using the inside information. You were fortunate that your name never came up then. And, of course, you have never paid a penny in taxes and have funneled money out of the country. That should be sufficient to land you in jail for some time.”

Shelkov bit his lower lip, hands in his lap, sweating profusely from more than the banya’s steam.

“But of course, that’s minor stuff,” continued the tall man. “Remember that girl that was found floating facedown in Moscow River seven years ago? Her colleague, another working girl, saw her leaving with your grandson, Valeriy. You know, the one that has a history of hiring prostitutes and beating them up? That time he went too far. Except that the witness suddenly disappeared and has never been seen again. But perhaps the mystery will be solved when the recording appears of you meeting with a hired killer and giving him \$50,000 to solve the problem. That’s what you called it, ‘solve the problem and make sure the body is not found,’ right?”

“How do you know this?”

“My dear General, we have a full dossier on you, starting from 1980 when you were a fresh out-of-college lieutenant serving in East Germany. Quite a few indiscretions in that file of yours.”

“What do you want?” Shelkov’s whisper was dull, defeated.

“Nothing yet. As a matter of fact, we want to help your career. Soon, you will become the Minister of Defense. We’ll just suggest certain courses of action when the time is right. I won’t be making such dramatic entrances, but once in a while your bodyguards will

have a message from 'Arkady.' Well, it's time for me to go. Zinaida should be here soon. Enjoy the affair."

The tall man got up and left the *banya* without looking back, leaving Shelkov slouched on the bench.

## *Beijing, China*

General Wu Cao, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, was hosting a monthly luncheon with the commanders of key branches of the People's Liberation Army (PLA): Admiral Kaiping Li of the PLA Navy (PLAN), General Yuan Chen of the Air Force and General Jian Liang of the Second Artillery Corps. The conversation topics were the usual ones: military tactics, projection of the PLA strength, Taiwan, achieving energy independence, securing resources. But everything was permeated by anxiety about the recent protests.

The unrest started in May of 2022 when the extent of the ruling elite's massive profiteering from the 2019 dollar crisis became known. Demonstrations had been brutally suppressed and some of the party and army leaders had been sacrificed to the charges of corruption. There were even a few public executions, all of lesser figures. But the protests continued to simmer and jelled into a public pro-democracy movement. It did not help matters that the orchestrated appreciation of the Chinese currency back in 2019 turned out to be not all that it promised: imported goods became cheaper, but exports declined and the Chinese population was not quite in a position to fully support a consumption-driven economy. Unemployment rose and with that anger and desperation. The Party was looking for solutions, but consensus remained elusive.

There was no agreement around the table either. The admiral was the most aggressive in arguing that the situation called for expansionary policies, to both secure new markets and create nationalistic support within the country. The other two commanders were more reserved, concerned about taking on a powerful US Navy. General Cao was mostly listening. As the senior officer, he did not feel the need to offer his opinion yet. But he was in agreement with the commanders of the Air Force and the Artillery Corps: while they had hurt the US economically, taking on the US militarily was still too dangerous. Perhaps if the American states had separated, similar to what happened to the Soviet Union thirty years ago. It looked like a

likely outcome back in 2022, but then some two nobodies managed to uncover Jonathan Schulmann's research into the events surrounding the 2019 crisis and all hell broke loose. Thankfully, Cao's name did not come up. The luck of the draw: Schulmann did not finish his analysis before he was assassinated, some names ended up on the list and some did not.

The commanders politely filed away, leaving Wu Cao with his thoughts. Soon he would be meeting with the General Secretary of the Party—what recommendations would he bring? The status quo was no longer feasible.

Cao's private phone rang. He looked at the screen of the mobile phone. It was his wife, probably with some request. "She should know to call my secretary." Cao irritably pushed the answer button.

"Good afternoon, General," said a man's voice in English.

"What?"

"Don't worry, your wife is perfectly fine. We are just spoofing her number. We'd like to talk to you about certain trading accounts registered to a French citizen that are in reality controlled by you."

"What are you talking about?" But in the pit of his stomach he knew.

"General, let's make it quick. We have the account numbers, the transactions. We also know about the bribes you've been taking since 2009, first as the commissar of the Sixteenth Group Army, then of the Jihan Military Region. We'll send you a detailed list if you like. Tens of millions of dollars. The scope of your—how shall I put it—transgressions, will likely result in more than a dishonorable dismissal. Especially since Chairman Liu is in the midst of yet another anti-corruption campaign."

"What do you want?"

"We'd like for you to give a stronger consideration to the views of Admiral Kaiping Li," came the reply. "He'll contact you for a private meeting to explain them in greater detail. We'll be happy to keep all the information secret in the meantime."

*New York, USA*

Robert Treadwell looked at the latest audience measurement numbers on the projected screen. He was still the most important news source person in the country. Turned out that in the age of addressable on-demand entertainment and millions of—mostly unpaid—reporters and content creators, people craved the certainty of a popular, timely and entertaining viewpoint. The Treadwell report provided this, artfully using all possible and, preferably, instantaneous media avenues. Any story, any tip was quickly picked up and distributed in twenty words or less, followed by a funny or biting commentary as appropriate. Scandals were the ultimate traffic drivers. Treadwell had his detractors that referred to him as a “moron with a website,” “sleaze purveyor,” and a “champion of idiotocracy.” He did not care—entertainers and politicians had been lining up for coverage and advertising money was rolling in.

Hearing a delicate knock, Treadwell turned off the external projection on his phone. The best part of the day was coming up. Treadwell had a predilection for girls. Many powerful men did. Some paid a heavy price, potentially the presidency for the likes of Elliot Spitzer and Gary Hart. But Treadwell was careful. He had to be because in his line of work he could not afford to become fodder for jokes. And because he liked his girls to be young—really young—the procurement was done through his trusted sidekick, Brian. Never saw the same girl twice. Sources and flats had been changed all the time. This was the first time that Treadwell used this particular flat on Park Avenue.

The girl was a bit older than he preferred, probably pushing twenty. Treadwell made a mental note to discuss this with Brian. But he forgot the thought soon thereafter. The girl was spectacular. Her body, her fingers, her throaty accented voice. Worth every penny. As she was dressing afterwards, Treadwell contemplated whether to break the rules and see her again.

Suddenly, the girl picked up a remote control on the side of the bed and a projection screen appeared on the opposite wall. Dumbfounded, Treadwell saw a super-high-resolution image of himself and a girl using a dildo on him.

“Should I turn on the sound?” The girl appeared fascinated watching the screen.

“What the fuck?” Treadwell was not amused. “Brian!”

A side door opened and a man walked in, carrying a manila folder in his left hand.

“I am afraid that Brian can’t be here at the moment,” he said. “Brian is... how shall we put it... tied up.”

“Who the hell are you?” Treadwell was trying to cover his nakedness with a pillow.

“It does not really matter, does it?” the man answered in a singsong tone. “And there is no point in covering yourself, Mr. Treadwell. Everything’s been captured. Natalya knew exactly where the cameras are.”

“How much?” Treadwell figured he’d have to pay up.

“We don’t want your money, Mr. Treadwell. We might even pay you. Purchase some targeted advertising on your channels perhaps?”

“So what the hell do you want?”

“Before we get to that, let’s look at some pictures, shall we?” The man started extracting large photos from the folder. “Here’s a subject from last November. She was fifteen at the time. Still is. Here’s one from July, fourteen years old. As a matter of fact, you have a bit of history with underage girls, Mr. Treadwell? We have a dossier going back to 2017, when your star just started to rise.”

“What do you want?” he asked again, this time defeated.

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Treadwell. You can keep these as a reminder.” The man carefully placed the manila folder on the bed.

*Hermosillo, Mexico*

Maggie sat on the balcony and closed her eyes, taking in the sounds and smells of an unusually warm spring night, the lazy bantering of two women on the street below, neighborhood kids laughing and running around before going to bed. David was still working on his computer and she appreciated these few minutes of solitude.

Almost two years of running. Immediately after the 2022 events, she and David spent a couple of months in Playa Del Carmen, then moved to Mexico City to hide in the giant swarm of ten million people. They started carefully withdrawing small sums of money from the accounts where they transferred the three million dollars they took from Nemzhov, moving them into local banks. Thanks to Alejandro's family and to Javier, they had multiple sets of documents.

That would have been their end, if not for the protection that Alejandro's family extended to them. Someone came into one of the local banks they were using, asking questions. The manager knew enough to send the word to the family. David and Maggie left the same day for Bucerias, a small town north of Puerto Vallarta. They used Canadian passports to pass as another rich Canadian couple spending their winter months in warm climes. The three months in Bucerias were her favorite time. They rented half-a-house from a free-spirited American woman. Maggie loved the gentle nights, with soft wind rustling in the palm trees and a bright moon glistening on the bay. She and David had fallen into an easygoing routine; they made love in the morning, went to the beach, swam and suntanned, ate, came back to the house to work until early evening, went for a walk, ate dinner, talked and made love again.

An experiment had been set up, transferring money from one of the accounts to a small one-branch bank in the Caribbean. Less than a day later, new faces appeared in the Caribbean town, watching the bank. An attempt with another account had the same result. There was no way to get the money out safely; all they had was what they

withdrew in cash and deposited directly. Less than three hundred thousand dollars. And now most of it was gone.

They had to run from Bucerias when the word came from the local police that someone started asking questions about them. There were no more carefree stays. Oaxaca, Guatemala, Mazatlan, Monterrey, back to Mexico City, Hermosillo... they moved wherever Alejandro's family could provide them with temporary protection, stayed for two to three months, moved again. David was feverishly working on the parts of Schulmann's data that had not been decoded yet. Maggie found it difficult to motivate herself; the information that they thought would change the world had not done much. Yes, some of the guilty parties lost their jobs but many did not; very few went to jail; the protests in China had been brutally suppressed. And the massive volume of disinformation had drowned out what she and David risked everything for. Their names had been dragged through the mud.

Nothing had changed. But David wouldn't give up, and she just could not bring herself to tell him that she was losing hope. So when he finally broke through and uncovered another batch of names, high-profile, dangerous names, she perhaps was not as thrilled as she should have been.

She saw pain in his face and tried to inject more excitement into her voice, but he lowered his eyes and said, "You think it's all been for nothing, don't you?"

"No, love, I am just tired. All the running, all the setbacks..."

He looked at her, then to the side, and spoke into the void. "I am sorry. Perhaps we should have accepted Nemzhov's offer two years ago. I wish I hadn't convinced you to publish Schulmann's research and go on the run. I know you want a child, a normal life."

She came close, took his face into her hands.

"Love, please don't think this way. You did not convince me to do this; I made this choice. Yes, I wish things would have been easier, I wish we did not have to live out of suitcases, always on the run. But that's how it is and we are together and alive. Now, what are we going to do with this new information? Who can we trust? Just

trying to distribute it on the internet won't do any good after all the lies that've been published."

David needed additional data, more than they had in Schulmann's file from two years ago. Who could have access to such information? One idea he had was to get in touch with Jim Brobak, the FBI friend of the late John Platt, who tried to help them two years ago in Texas. But how? They ended up contacting Oleg. Since Playa Del Carmen, they'd only seen Oleg twice, but he'd been carefully staying in touch.

It was Oleg who came up with the idea of smuggling them back into Los Angeles. In truth, there was no choice. It was dangerous to go into the unknown, but even more dangerous to stay. Alejandro's family had been shielding them in Mexico out of promises made back then. But Oleg knew that inside the large and powerful family different voices had been getting more vocal, arguing that the risks of protecting the two fugitives had become too great. They had to leave Mexico and return to the very place they barely escaped two years ago.

Maggie got up, went back inside, floorboards creaking under her bare feet. David turned around, smiled at her.

"Rosa, come inside! Rosa!" She heard their landlady calling from below. "Come in, you'll catch a cold!"

"No, Grandma, I won't," replied the laughing voice of a precocious four-year-old.

Maggie's heart gave a pang. The day they moved in six weeks ago, cheeky Rosa came in and introduced herself like a tiny adult. There was an immediate affection between Maggie and the child. Soon, she'd have to give up Rosa.

*Richmond, Virginia, USA*

Three men and a woman gathered around a small conference table in a richly adorned business office with a panoramic view of the city.

“I brought you here to discuss a very important project for our company,” said the owner of the office. He was the youngest of the four, in his early forties, tall, clean cut, impeccably dressed, straight posture alluding to a military background.

“Erik, we just won the FBI contract worth almost half a billion in annual revenue.” The woman smiled. She looked to be in her sixties, the oldest at the meeting. “You are going to top that?”

“Have faith, Nancy. I don’t mean to diminish the FBI win—you’ve done an amazing job on that—but this is bigger.”

“Well, are you going to tease us or come out with it?” growled one of the men good-naturedly. He was the only one in the room that did not carry himself with a military bearing. If anything, he was substantially overweight, his stomach spilling over a belt buckle, his face sweaty and the color of raw steak. “Because unlike you, a high-flying CEO, I have some grunt budget work to do. Making sure that this company of yours can actually pay its bills.”

“I know, Dean, I know, the CFO makes trains run on time. All right, here it is: I just agreed to provide protection and security services for John Dimon!”

The man called Erik paused for effect. But his listeners appeared to be more flabbergasted than enthused.

“You mean the presidential candidate, the head of the Spirit of ’76 party?” asked the man who’d been silent so far. Despite a rainy day outside, he was dressed in a white cotton suit. His appearance and slight drawl reminded one of an actor playing a pre-Civil War Southern gentleman, except for his very hard eyes.

“Yes, that’s the one,” confirmed Erik. “Blair, you don’t seem to be excited about it.”

“I am not excited about it either.” The fat man spread his hands. “Personally, I like John Dimon and plan to vote for him, but how are we going to make money on this? And I wonder how it will impact

the rest of our business. Dimon is not an establishment candidate. We risk antagonizing some of our potential customers.”

“Dean, I promise you that we’ll be making more money on this than on any of our projects, including Nancy’s beloved FBI contact. And as for impact on the rest of our business, we were not planning to bid on any new government business for the next few months and we won’t have the resources for that anyway.” He turned to the man in a white suit. “Blair, who is your best overall program management guy, one who can handle difficult people and is well respected within the company?”

“For protection services, that’ll be Bob Johnson,” replied Blair. “He’s done some difficult projects for us.”

“OK, I’ve met him. Put any resources he needs at his disposal. And Nancy, you provide any surveillance assistance that Bob will require. This will be our priority one project.”

“But why, Erik? Why are we taking this risk?” Nancy shook her head in puzzlement.

Erik jumped up, walked back and forth impatiently, then turned to his listeners with a pained expression.

“Look, it’s not just about FreedomShield! This country is on the wrong track! We all know it. We all want someone like John Dimon to come in and get us back on the right path.” Punching the air with his index finger, he added, “This is our chance to help make this happen. We’ll get paid well in the process and, if Dimon wins as we all expect him to—he is far ahead in the polls now—we are golden!”

Erik calmed down, sat back at the table, smiled.

“OK, time’s a-wasting. Let’s get back to work. Blair, come back with Bob Johnson once you get him.”

As the visitors were leaving, Erik called out to Dean, “Dean, hold on a minute. Close the door.”

Dean shut the door after the other two and turned back. “Yes?”

“I’ll need you to set up a few special project accounts. Give them some unrelated names.”

“Why?”

“Most of the payments will not be coming from the Dimon’s campaign. There is no reason to risk disclosure on how much we’ll be

getting paid for this. I want you to handle this personally; don't delegate."

Dean pulled a handkerchief out, wiped beads of sweat off his now even redder face, and sighed uneasily. "OK, Erik."

The younger man turned back to the window, signaling that the conversation was over.

Dean began leaving, then hesitated. "Erik?"

"Yes, Dean?" he asked with a hint of irritation.

"What if Dimon loses? We'll burn our bridges in Washington..."

Dean left the phrase hanging in the air, as if to emphasize the gravity of the decision.

Erik looked at the other man a few moments longer than necessary.

"Well, Dean, we better do everything in our power to make sure he wins then... everything."

**JUNE 2024**

*Beijing, China*

It was perhaps the most contentious meeting of the Party's Central *Politburo* on record. More so than the one five years ago when the financial attack on the US was agreed upon. Usually, this group of the twenty-five most powerful people in China came to decisions by consensus. Today, some of the members seemed close to throwing punches.

"We must take decisive action!" Wang Hunshan, President of the Central Party School, pounded the table. "Young people are turning away from the Party en masse. They are demonstrating in the streets and openly calling for the end of the Party's rule. This can't be allowed to go on!"

"What do you propose, that we send tanks against them again, like we did in 2022 and 1989?" Sun Yang, Head of the Central Politics and Law Commission, snapped back. "We've already been labeled 'The Butchers of Beijing,' should we add to that reputation? The problem is, there are no jobs for many of these people. That's why they are not content!"

"The problem is jobs," agreed Li Zhang, the Party Chief of Shanghai. "Appreciation of the renminbi and widespread use of robotics made our labor—and our products—less competitive. Even the Americans are now able to undercut our manufacturing costs. We spent enormous resources to undermine the US dollar, just to see our renminbi being sabotaged by digital currencies that people use to smuggle money out of the country. The pride of our achievements in 2022 gave way to disappointment. And the Americans, after the initial surprise, are gathering strength. Some of their politicians are now openly talking about taking aggressive action against us."

"Let's not overreact to typical American election-year rhetoric. And in any case, we've been over these issues before," pointed out Kai Liu, the General Secretary. "You describe problems but not the solutions."

"If I may, Mr. General Secretary," General Wu Cao, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, said quietly.

“General...” Kai Liu motioned for others to be silent as Wu Cao carefully offered his opinion.

“Addressing the ‘Taiwan problem’ would both contribute to our economic power and channel the people’s energy in a new direction, uniting them behind the flag.”

“That again?” Sun Yang spread his hands. “How many times will the military bring this up? Wars are easy to start, but hard to win. Taiwan is under American protection. We can’t capture Taiwan without gaining control of the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Philippine Sea. The American fleet is still too powerful. We’ve been told it’ll be at least another twenty years before we can take them on. Plus, we’ll encounter resistance from Vietnam, Japan, Philippines, even India.”

“I completely agree with my esteemed colleague.” Wu Cao nodded. “We can’t take Taiwan without addressing these issues. But I don’t think we can afford to wait another twenty years. Nor do we have to.”

Wu Cao paused for full effect, poured himself a glass of water. Everyone’s eyes were on him.

“The real problem is indeed in establishing our sphere of influence over the vast area of the ocean west of the Japan–Indonesia line. That would not only provide us with the additional economic assets of rich Taiwan, but will also provide us with vast resources of oil and natural gas near the disputed Spratlys Islands, secure access of shipments through the Malacca Straits that carry most of our imported materials, and greatly expand our exclusive economic zone. Japan, our old nemesis, is no longer a factor, as they self-destroyed financially, between massive government debts and aging population. But the Americans continue to stand in our way because of their superior ‘blue water’ capabilities and the military alliances they have built with other countries in the region. And as long as they do, these countries feel secure in opposing our interests.”

“Tell us something we don’t know.” Sun Yang was being quite impolite this day.

“Yes, this is known. As it is known that we can control the offshore action but don’t possess the long-distance operational

capabilities that would rival the Americans. But, contrary to the earlier thinking, we don't have to defeat the Americans on the open seas in order to win the battle for Taiwan."

"And do you have a detailed plan on how to do this?" asked Kai Liu.

Wu Cao nodded. "We are close, Comrade Secretary."

Kai Liu raised his right hand, the index finger pointing straight at the general.

"Let's discuss it when you have the plan and contingencies for what will inevitably go wrong. I agree that winning the battle for Taiwan would greatly help in addressing our difficult economic and political situation. But I said 'winning,' not 'starting.' Starting is easy. In 1941, Japan started with a successful attack on Pearl Harbor. We all know how this ended. You are proposing to start a war with a country that is militarily stronger than us. We can't do this as a desperate gamble; we must have overwhelming chances of success before taking any action. Domestically, we will not survive the failure."

The secretary put his right hand back on the table, signaling that this particular discussion was over.

"General, when you are ready to provide a detailed analysis, let me know and we'll arrange for a proper forum to deliberate."

*Los Angeles, USA*

The two-story block house on the corner was surrounded by a tall fence with barbed wire on top. First-floor windows had bars on them. This was not unusual at all: even though this Mid-City area was only a few blocks west of the safe, well-groomed and heavily guarded USC campus, it had neither safety nor grooming. But unlike its immediate neighbors to the north, south, and further west, this particular block was known to be safe. Some of the houses on the block belonged to heavily armed people that liked their surroundings to be quiet and crime-free. This point had been emphasized a year ago to some of the local gang members and just unruly citizens. Since then, it'd been quiet. The heavily armed people took care of their neighbors financially and safety-wise, the neighbors reciprocated by behaving properly and seeing and hearing nothing. So when another black self-driving SUV with a telltale laser sensor bump on the roof pulled into the corner house's garage at 1 a.m., nobody paid any attention.

Once the garage door closed, the lights came on. The human driver guided two men and a woman upstairs, into what looked like a living room. There was a faint whirring sound and the floor reverberated ever so slightly. Maggie looked around: wooden floor with an expensive-looking rug, dim lighting, a leather sofa with a glass coffee table against one wall, a cherry-wood bookshelf lining another wall, an expressionist painting, a mahogany table with six matching chairs. Accurate, orderly, designed to look warm. She crinkled her nose; there was a smell of leather, tobacco, and hot wood even though no fireplace was visible. Perhaps a candle had been burning a while earlier.

A tall, goateed, olive-complexioned man of about thirty came into the room. He wore a camelhair jacket, shaded eyeglasses, a white open-collared shirt, hugging blue jeans, and dark brown shoes. Maggie's eyes caught gold cufflinks peeking from the jacket's sleeves and a black-and-gold watch with a silvery bracelet.

The man opened his arms. "Oleg, Maggie, David!"

After a round of hugs and kisses, Oleg exclaimed, “Alejandro, you devil, how do you stay looking so young?”

“Safe and wholesome living, my friend. I don’t have half of the world’s secret services looking for me. Plus, I sold my soul to the devil.”

He laughed, took a couple of steps back, gave his visitors an appraising look. “Whoever worked on you was good. If I met you on the street, I’m not sure I would have recognized you.” He laughed. “David, your nose looks a hundred times better.”

David unconsciously touched his nose. “Yes, it was broken in a bicycle accident when I was a kid. The doctor straightened it.”

David was still in his thirties but looked older, with cropped prematurely gray hair, hazel eyes, his posture slightly stooped to betray his real height.

“For the record, I was disappointed,” Maggie chimed in. “I loved that crooked nose.”

Under Alejandro’s gaze, she instinctively tried to imagine what she looked like: a tired woman in her early-to-mid-thirties, with long blond hair, round face, gray eyes, light skin, dressed in a white embroidered shirt and tight blue jeans. Alejandro’s eyes lingered on her a second too long and Maggie put her arm around David’s waist.

Alejandro turned to Oleg. “And I see they fixed your crooked teeth, my friend. Plus you lost some weight and changed your hair.”

Oleg spread his arms, posing.

“Perfect new teeth and shiny blue eyes—to the delight of Mexican senioritas.”

Alejandro laughed, then grew serious.

“OK, why are you back? Why are you taking this risk?”

Oleg grew serious as well.

“Maggie and David... actually, officially it’s Ann and Mark at this time... and I am Peter... they’ve been trying to finish Schulmann’s work and discovered more important names connected to the 2019 crisis. One, in particular.”

“So why come here? Why not publish them like you did two years ago?” Alejandro looked at David and Maggie in puzzlement. “Mind you, I am very happy to see you.” He let the ending hang in the air as his eyes stopped on her.

“Remember what happened then?” replied Maggie. “Within a few days they had begun a massive disinformation campaign, mixing true and false data, guilty and innocents. So that the guilty ones have been able to point to false data or to those who’ve been unfairly accused and claim that their hands were clean. Most of those with connections got away.”

“Plus we have some major gaps in the data that we have to close,” David continued. “But what we found is too important to ignore. We have to get more data and then pass this information to trusted parties.”

“And how are you going to do this?” Alejandro wondered.

“We have a couple of ideas.” Oleg scratched the side of his face. “They required David and Maggie to come here. We’re all taking a big chance. But right now, we are tired; it’s been a long journey.”

“Of course, forgive me for holding you here,” Alejandro apologized. “Please come up and rest. Your bedrooms are ready. While the house is plain on the outside, I believe you’ll find it quite comfortable.”

*Smolny Institute, St. Petersburg, Russia*

President Boris Mosin was looking from the window at the statue of Lenin standing in the middle of a small flower garden. Lenin was confidently pointing to the north, to Finland. Summer came to St. Petersburg late this year and, despite the sun being out, the air was chilly and people on the street had their overcoats and scarves on.

“I still don’t understand how this could have happened.” Mosin shook his head. “The Minister of Defense is killed in broad daylight in the middle of the city? And we have no suspects?”

Dmitry Kolotov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, spread his arms. “The FSB, the Military Police, and even the local *militzia* are all investigating.”

“I certainly hope so and they better find who did it,” grumbled Mosin. He had known Maksim Nedinsky for many years, liked the man, and was angry over Nedinsky’s death. “Well, Maksim is now at his chosen resting place at Volkovo Cemetery, where generations of his predecessors have been buried. But the business of Russia’s defense must go on.”

He looked suspiciously at General Yuriy Shelkov, the new Minister of Defense, who shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“General, how are the ongoing joint exercises with the Chinese Navy going?”

“Well, Mr. President, I think they are proceeding quite well,” replied Shelkov carefully. “It took our forces two days of sailing from Vladivostok to rendezvous with PLAN in the East China Sea and we’ve been conducting coordinated maneuvers for six days now.”

“And why do you think the Chinese asked to have these exercises?”

“We have complementary force structure between our Pacific Fleet and their Navy: we now have two modern aircraft carriers with over a hundred Su-35 and Su-37 naval planes there, while PLAN’s strength is in helicopter carriers, anti-ship missiles, fast-attack ships and amphibious landing crafts.”

Mosin prodded. “In other words, they are more suited for invasion while ours is an open-water fleet?”

“That would be mostly correct, sir.”

“And why is that so?”

“They’ve always been focused on threatening Taiwan and configured their Navy accordingly, for defense and access denial warfare,” explained Shelkov. “The Chinese themselves projected that it would be another twenty years before they would be able to rival the open-water capabilities of the US Navy.”

“But they can’t take Taiwan with the US Navy present, right?”

“That would be a risky operation. The US Seventh Fleet is only a few days of sailing from the Formosa Strait and Taiwan’s own defenses can hold off the invaders for that long. The Chinese have invested heavily into developing anti-ship missiles, but they are not proven against moving targets beyond a couple hundred miles, not enough to keep the Americans away from Taiwan.”

“I wonder why the Chinese ambassador was so insistent on expanding the scope of these joint exercises,” Mosin wondered aloud. “Do they really think that our Pacific Fleet can stop the Americans?”

“I doubt they would think that. Our fleet is less than half the size of the Seventh.”

“Are Americans watching the exercises?”

“Yes, they have ships and airplanes in the area.”

Mosin nodded. “Please make sure these exercises do not result in any provocative actions from our side. Don’t approach US planes or ships. I don’t want us to be sucked into any kind of military adventures there.”

*Washington, DC, USA*

President Joe Maxwell and his VP Brian Tice stared grimly at the numbers that their political advisor Michael Drake projected on the screen.

“With less than five months to go, both main political parties are way behind in the polls?” asked Maxwell incredulously.

“Yes.” Drake nodded. “I guess the good news, if there is any, is that Brian is running third, ahead of the other major party candidate.”

“Please spare me this nonsense,” snapped Brian Tice. “John Dimon is ahead with thirty-one percent of the likely voters, Jeff Kron right after him with twenty-six percent, and I am way behind with nineteen percent. Didn’t you tell me back in March that Dimon and Kron would flame out before the summer? Even if all ‘undecideds’ broke for me, if the elections were tomorrow I would still lose.”

“Well, the elections are not tomorrow. There are many ‘undecideds’ and some will change their minds,” Maxwell pointed out unenthusiastically. In all fairness, he couldn’t stand his VP and would have chosen someone else back in 2016, but the contest was projected to be close and Tice brought key electoral votes from the South. Eight years later, he liked Tice even less, but the party’s National Committee decided last year that Tice was their best chance to hold the office. “Let’s discuss our primary travel plans.”

Tice ignored the president. “Michael, run us through the candidates and the issues again.”

Drake seemed uncertain, looking from irate Maxwell to angry Tice, then decided to address Tice’s question.

“Our behavioral insights team tells me that these are truly the ‘protest’ elections. We expect that over seventy percent of people will vote this year, much larger numbers than we’ve seen in the past. The difference is particularly pronounced amongst the young people, whose participation is expected to double. Unfortunately, a vast majority of those voters that previously stayed home are breaking for the two new parties, the Spirit of ‘76 and the Reform ones.”

“Why are we seeing such an increase in participation?” asked Tice.

“In polling, the big drivers are the ‘Schulmann file’ revelations published two years ago by David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin.”

“But these ‘revelations’ have been thoroughly discredited!” protested Tice. “Multiple versions of these so-called files have circulated, and many names and accounts have been shown to be false.”

“Come on, Brian.” Maxwell slammed his hand against the table. “Do you think everyone bought into the fabricated ‘evidence’ that was used to let some of the guiltiest sons-of-bitches of this country escape jail time?”

“I’m afraid the President is correct,” Drake said. “I think a great many people believed the original allegations, not the subsequent denials. Remember how most politicians that were named in the Schulmann file ended up being thrown out of office via elections or recalls, even though they were not found legally guilty?”

Tice shook his head. “That was almost two years ago. People’s memories are short.”

“Evidently, not that short, at least not for some,” continued Drake. “Dimon and Kron bring to the table some powerful arguments. We had three economic crises in this still young century. The national debt has tripled, well-paying jobs are hard to find, robots are replacing people left and right, the divide between the upper echelon and the rest of the country keeps growing. And then they see that the very people they believe to be guilty and responsible walked away with billions and are flaunting their wealth. Populist politicians are feeding this anti-establishment discontent. That’s why you see this sudden rise of two new parties.”

“Can’t we do something populist?” asked Tice. “Like offer a tax rebate? Increase welfare payments? Add some new tax credits?”

“With what money, Brian?” Maxwell spit out. “Our tax receipts are down as is, the budget deficit is over a trillion dollars, and nobody would buy any more of our Treasury bonds unless we offer usurious interest rates! The Federal Reserve can’t buy anything since their trillions in mortgage-backed bonds blew up in 2019.”

The corners of Tice’s mouth pulled down. “OK, let’s go over John Dimon and Jeff Kron again, this time focusing on how to attack them.”

“Of course. Part of the problem is, they—and the platforms of their parties—are very different,” complained Drake. “Hard to go after them on the same grounds.”

He stopped, poured himself a glass of water and noisily gulped it down.

“OK, let’s start with John Dimon. Former mainstream politician, congressman from Colorado from 2014 to 2020. Following the crisis of 2019, quit the mainstream party and joined a fledgling new Spirit of ‘76 movement. Transformed the movement into an organized party that is fielding candidates in most of the states. Young, very charismatic, strong speaker. His ‘America First’ platform calls for acting aggressively to punish China and Russia for their ‘financial attack on our country’—his words, not mine. He is for high tariffs on imported goods, cancellation of most of the trade agreements, effective prohibition of outsourcing jobs out of the country, draconian penalties for corporate crime...”

“He is going to drive the country into a war, a real one, not economic!” Maxwell said.

“Dimon is feeding off popular discontent; populist slogans work. People want to punish the unfairness and are looking for some way to channel their outrage. And he keeps promising to increase, not reduce, various forms of state assistance and welfare.”

“There were some rumors that Dimon profited from the 2019 crisis,” Tice half asked, half stated. “There is some shadiness to the man.”

“There were rumors about practically everyone. The fact is that Dimon is a good speaker and has received a tremendous amount of online coverage, partly thanks to Robert Treadwell and his social media empire. He has mastered the art of the slogan, the sound-bite, developed a very high name recognition, and is now leading in all the polls.”

“He refused the Secret Service protection and is using the private FreedomShield forces. These mercenaries are expensive. Where does he get so much money?” Maxwell wondered.

“Dimon is very active in soliciting campaign contributions and signed up some deep-pocketed backers. His use of FreedomShield

has been somewhat controversial, especially in light of accusations of intimidation leveled against this company. So far, it hasn't caused problems for Dimon."

Drake paused to drink water again.

"And what about Jeff Kron?" Maxwell asked.

"A very different bird, this Kron." Drake pursed his lips. "Same age as Dimon—forty-two—but, oh so different. Tragedy in his youth when his father killed himself, ruined during a recession. Twenty years ago he was sent to jail for a murder of the man he held responsible. Released after less than three years because the real murderer confessed."

"Was it his future wife that helped to get him released?" asked Maxwell.

"Not quite. It was an interesting story." Drake's cheeks reddened with excitement. "In one of the interviews, Kron stated that he thought his wife's father and grandfather were instrumental in proving his innocence. I checked and both committed suicide in 2006, a few months before Kron's release. Fascinating, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah." Tice waved dismissively. "He is a goddamn commie with a Russian wife."

"Jennifer Kron, maiden name Jennifer Rostin, is half-Russian on her father's side," Drake said, calming down. "On her mother's side, her grandfather is Sam Baker, a long-time US congressman."

"So perhaps trying to attack Kron via his wife is not such a great idea." Maxwell snickered. Tice turned crimson and stuck out his jaw; it was well known that his political rise had been financed from his wife's side with the money only one generation removed from organized crime.

"After his release in 2007," Drake hurried on, "Kron finished his college studies, got married, and had a daughter. Over time, he developed this Gandhi-like philosophy—I hesitate to call it a 'platform'—about nonviolent resistance to an unfair system. He also used the California initiative system to put a number of measures on the ballot. His writings and propositions developed a bit of a following, but it was the 2019 crisis that attracted to Kron a critical mass of supporters. As California was teetering on the edge of

separation in 2022, Kron was thrust into the limelight. Without any campaigning, he became one of the most popular politicians in California.”

Drake paused. “Mind you, he did not position himself as a politician, did not act like one. Did not run a campaign. People just gravitated to him. It was kind of a melding of a political and spiritual movement.”

“But he now has a party! They put their people on ballots in multiple states!” exclaimed Tice.

“Yes, they call it a ‘Reform’ party, but they don’t have the organization of a mainstream party. Or the one that Dimon put together. Theirs is almost a loose organization of people that believe in common goals, united by Kron’s writings.”

“And what is their platform?” asked Maxwell.

“The central tenet is a more equitable distribution of wealth and income—”

“I keep telling you, he’s a commie!” Tice pounded his fist against the table.

Drake shook his head. “Kron claims he is specifically against communism as a system. He says he supports capitalism, but believes that extreme concentration of wealth undermines democracy and give a small group of people too much power. Kron’s ‘platform’ is a set of reforms intended to create more direct democracy and to reduce the inequality he sees around him.”

“OK, Michael,” interrupted Tice. “We’ve been running against both Dimon and Kron on a ‘Stay the course—things are getting better!’ message. We have the mainstream media on our side, we show the numbers that the economy is indeed getting better, but here I am, a distant third in the polls!”

“Well, Mr. Vice President,” Drake said, “the mainstream media just does not have the same clout any longer, losing ground to diversified social media platforms like Treadwell’s. And people don’t trust the numbers because they don’t see improvements in their situation. With the middle class now making up less than a third of the population, we have a minority of the population doing well while the majority is struggling. Both Dimon and Kron are dipping into a deep well of anger, they are just channeling it differently:

Dimon is blaming the external enemies while Kron is pointing inward.”

“So what should we do?”

“I think it’s time to move to negative campaigning.” Drake cut the air with the palm of his hand. “Start aggressively portraying both Dimon and Kron as dangerous, bound to make the situation worse, not better. This may dissuade some of their supporters, perhaps get them to stay home on Election Day.”

Maxwell grimaced at the mention of negative campaigning and stood up.

“Gentlemen, I am afraid I have to go. I have an audience with an ambassador of the Philippines. Speaking of dangerous situations, they are worried about increasingly threatening rhetoric coming from China.”

After the meeting broke up, Tice went to his office. He looked out the window for a few minutes, then picked up the phone.

“Roger, give me the FBI director.”

A minute later, Director Miller was on the line.

“Hello, Brian.”

“Hi, Ryan. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Well, when the Vice President calls, I step out of my meetings.”

“Thank you. Ryan, I have a favor to ask. I presume you are keeping an eye on John Dimon and Jeff Kron, right?”

“Of course. For their safety.”

“Naturally. Ryan, I’d like you to follow them a bit more closely and report to me when you see something interesting.”

“You mean like comprehensive surveillance? Phone, internet, conversations, video recording, drone tracking, agents?”

“Well, perhaps not agents. I don’t want to hear about this on TV.”

“Brian, this is not right. You’re looking for dirt on other candidates and you want me to spy on them for you?”

“Ryan, I think it’s entirely appropriate. We, candidates of major parties, get vetted through many years of public service, living our lives in the open. They came out of nowhere. Who knows what skeletons are hiding in their closets, what allegiances they carry?”

Don't you worry about the background of people that have a chance to occupy the Oval Office?"

"As you know, we did quite thorough background checks on them and found nothing of concern."

"Ryan, it depends on what you search for. Everyone is guilty of something, you just have to look long enough."

"And we'll need warrants for comprehensive surveillance."

Miller's tone was admitting defeat.

"Well, Ryan, think about it this way. I know you have political ambitions. Either one of these guys, if they were to come to power, will kick you out of your office. If you refuse to help me and I win, I will also kick you out of the office. Your only chance of staying in Washington and perhaps one day being on a ticket is to help me win. As for warrants, don't you have some discretion in these matters? Plenty of people have been followed electronically without warrants."

Miller breathed heavily, deliberating.

"OK, Brian. I'll keep an eye out and let you know if anything of interest shows up."

*Los Angeles, USA*

Maggie brushed her hair, studying herself in the mirror. She now wore the hair long and blond. Eyes, cheeks, lips, nose—all had undergone careful alterations. Two plastic surgeries to keep them ahead of ever-evolving and spreading face detection technologies. She touched the crow's feet around her eyes. Would have loved to get rid of them but their cosmetic work was for survival, not beauty. They did not have the money for a third surgery anyway.

The journey from Hermosillo had taken three days. Oleg had come into town and brought a set of new documents and 'life history' files. He made them participate in a virtual reality demo of the border crossing between Aqua Prieta and Douglas—the trip planners decided to use it instead of a more popular Nogales.

The last night there, she and David had a fight. He wanted to go back by himself.

"It's not necessary for you to go. I'll do it and come back for you."

"You expect me to stay here by myself? What if something happens to you?"

"Nothing will happen. And in any case, what can..." He caught himself.

"Go ahead, finish it! You were gonna say 'What can you do?' Right? Right?"

David said nothing, just bit his lip.

"Damn you, David! Damn you! When I was kidnapped two years ago, did you say 'What can I do?' Or did you idiotically go there unarmed and try to bluff them into letting me go?"

"Idiotically?"

"Yes, it was the dumbest, stupidest thing imaginable." She put her arms around him, stuck her face into his chest.

"I just want to end this," he said, his hand stroking her hair. "I can't live like this any longer. I can't do this to you any longer."

“I know, love, I know,” she mumbled. He could barely hear as her words caught up in his shirt. “I want to end this too. But we have to do it together.”

The next day an old Suburban with two close-mouthed guides picked them up and drove to the border. They crossed at midnight without problems and stayed overnight in a small house in Douglas. In the afternoon, a dual cab pickup truck came, also with two silent-type guides, and drove them northwest towards Phoenix. Maggie noticed a small video camera mounted on a dashboard and asked the guides what it was for.

One of the guides replied, “To record things.”

“What things? Why?”

“Police. Want to have our own record.”

Maggie did not press further. An hour later a police cruiser pulled up next to them, stayed even for a few seconds, then sped away.

The guide turned back and asked Maggie, “Did you see this?”

“The police car?”

“Yep. No people in it.”

“Really?” David wondered. “I thought I saw a driver.”

“That’s just a mannequin. They deployed these self-driving police cars on the interstates a year ago. Measures your speed, takes a picture of your license plate and the occupants, runs a query. If you are wanted for anything, lights start flashing, and you have to pull over. I hear in some places they are using robot policemen now, but here you wait until a car with deputies arrives.”

“And if you don’t stop?”

“Two or three of these cars converge on you, a police drone swoops in from overhead. If you get off the road, they’ll shoot out your tires.”

The pickup crew dropped them off in a small cul-de-sac house in a working-class area of Phoenix. An old couple there already had dinner waiting for the travelers.

At the table, David asked their hosts, “I’ve seen a bunch of *No Taxation Without Representation!* signs today, some on the side of the road, some painted on buildings. Why is that?”

The old man explained, “They just sprung up in the last year or so. Some folks feel that the government represents only rich people. They figure if the government does not stand for me, I should not have to pay to support it.”

“There were always people that claimed the government should not be collecting taxes ...”

“True, but those were fringe folks that just refused to pay outright. Nowadays, it’s gone to regular people. That’s why you see the signs popping up everywhere.”

It was past four in the afternoon the next day when the doorbell rang and, to the hosts’ great relief, a man came to get Oleg, Maggie, and David. He introduced himself as Mike, apologized and explained that he had to change cars in Phoenix and that took longer than planned. “With video cameras everywhere plugged into computer systems looking for anything even slightly unusual, we did not want to have the same car going from LA to Phoenix and back in one day.” A black SUV with a bump on the roof was parked outside. The driver dictated an address and the car took off by itself.

“Hey, what are you doing? Put your hands on the steering wheel!” exclaimed Oleg.

The driver laughed.

“I will if needed. It’s a self-driving car. Did you see the laser sensor on the roof?”

Oleg looked decidedly uneasy for the next couple of hours, but the car drove comfortably and he eventually relaxed.

Huge 3-D electronic billboards bombarded them from both sides of the freeway. Showgirls were throwing up their legs and inviting them to visit Las Vegas. A humanoid robot was raking a garden and proudly proclaiming that he came with a five-year head-to-toe warranty. A happy-looking couple standing in front of a house full of lights proudly proclaimed that with their new generator they no longer worried about power outages. A smiling man was waving to passing cars, the billboard proclaiming *John Dimon, A True American Patriot*. An electronics company was pushing its product with *The PowerWatch—the Last Computer You Will Ever Need!*

“I got myself one of those PowerWatches,” said Mike, the nominal driver. “Projects a screen, projects a keyboard. True, don’t need no computer.”

It was close to midnight when they entered the never-ending suburbs of LA. From her past trips to Big Bear and Las Vegas, Maggie remembered brightly lit neon signs lining the freeway for dozens of miles. Now, these signs were interspersed with patches of darkness.

“Less than twenty miles worth of gas left,” the car announced in a metallic voice. “Should I look for a gas station?”

“Yes,” replied Mike.

They got off the 10 Freeway and drove down a dark street where the car pulled into a gas station. However, the station looked like it had been closed for days, if not months.

“Find another station,” Mike instructed the car.

The next one was open. Before getting out of the car, Mike reached under the driver’s seat, pulled out a gun, and stuck it into his belt. After filling up, the car took them back on the freeway.

“Why are these streets so dark?” asked David.

“Some of the suburbs have been hit pretty hard in the last few years,” explained Mike. “Water and electricity became more expensive. People that could not afford their house and utility payments started walking away, moving to more urban areas. Then squatters would show up. Once a couple of houses on a block get taken over by squatters, other families would start leaving. Then businesses would go. Some areas, especially gated communities, brought in security and managed to keep their places safe. Other neighborhoods went dark, turned into ghost cities.”

Maggie brought her thoughts back to the present, to LA, to Alejandro’s house where they managed to arrive safely. Her eyes grazed over a silver box of birth control pills. She steadfastly refused to switch to easier, more modern methods because this one was the fastest to reverse. While in Mexico, a few times she and David talked about her stopping the pills, but they had never felt safe enough to bring a child into this world. Maggie shook off the memories, took

one more look in the mirror, narrowed her eyes, inhaled and slowly released. *Cowardice is the greatest sin. Please give me the strength to endure.*

*Denver, USA*

“Where the hell is he?” bellowed Jonathan Morton. “I rushed here from the airport, all upset over being half an hour late, and you two lover boys are sitting here sucking on your thumbs!” he pointed at Bob Johnson and Chris Bigelow.

Johnson, a stocky corduroy-jacketed man with a brush cut, nodded at the closed door on the left side of the enormous suite.

“There.”

“Alone?”

“No.”

“Damn it, Chris, you are campaign co-manager; you have to control him! With all his talk about values, last thing we need is for him to be caught bonking women left and right!”

“Get off your damn horse,” snarled Bigelow. He looked the opposite of Johnson: short, thin, pale, and almost delicate. Armani suit, perfectly arranged tie. Surprisingly deep voice did not match the appearance. “You know he won’t listen. And I am not sure that news of his womanizing would be such a horrible setback. In our polling, people like him for his strong leadership. This may even add to his alpha male image.”

“Are you at least making sure his dalliances don’t have some sordid history?” Morton turned on Johnson.

“I am a head of security, not a pimp,” retorted Johnson angrily. “We do check what we can, but it’s not like I’m procuring his girls.”

“Who is she this time?”

“One of the party representatives from Illinois. He flew a bunch of them in for one of his inspirational talks. His eyes were glued to her rack during the whole speech, so we knew what was gonna happen. Her record is clean.”

“Well, at least you are checking. And thanks for not wearing that ugly FreedomShield uniform.”

Bigelow and Morton both smirked.

As Johnson turned crimson and started getting up, the door on the left opened and John Dimon appeared, buttoning his shirt. His face and chest were red with perspiration. Amazingly, his famous hair

looked perfect: groomed, smooth, nothing out of place, dark with just a touch of grey on the sides. Communicating virility and experience.

“What’s all the noise, my friends?” he boomed out. “Are you killing each other again?”

Dimon walked over to the side table, poured and noisily drank a glass of water. He left the bedroom door wide open, treating the room’s occupants to the view of a blond woman in her late thirties busily trying to cover and arrange herself.

Dimon turned back to her:

“Susan, dear, say hi to my brain trust here!”

Susan whimpered something in embarrassment and tried to sneak out of the suite, but Dimon intercepted her and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Dear, thank you so much for explaining to me the situation in your state and for working so tirelessly on our campaign. I am blessed to have such dedicated, good-looking representatives.”

After he escorted Susan out, Dimon turned to his team.

“Damn, those legs! Which state is she from? Let’s put some extra support behind her.”

“I wish you weren’t taking such chances now,” Bigelow grimly commented. “Get elected, then chase all the tail you want.”

“Oh, don’t be a killjoy!” Dimon laughed. “I need this energy boost. How would I campaign otherwise?”

“I’m glad you remember there is a campaign going on,” retorted Morton. “Because I bring some damn good campaign news to you.”

“Now we are talking!” Dimon slammed his palm on the table, his face getting even redder. “Hit me with it.”

Ignoring expectant silence, Morton sauntered to the side table, poured himself a couple fingers of scotch, sniffed it, and took a slow swallow.

“Ah, this is better. Guess where I just flew from?”

“Jonathan, cut this crap! Just tell me!”

“Patience, patience. I came from Pennsylvania. You will be going there in a few days.”

“Why? Pennsylvania is not on our campaign schedule until late July,” Bigelow asked.

“Because that’s where John will be giving his speech on the Fourth of July!”

“He is supposed to be giving a speech right here in Denver,” protested Bigelow.

“Cancel that. John will be giving his speech at Gettysburg!”

Morton enjoyed his triumph as the three others exclaimed in shock.

“How did you pull this off?” Even Dimon was floored.

Morton smiled. “The superintendent of the Gettysburg National Military Park is a big supporter of yours. He actually contacted us with this idea and I flew there to meet him. Just imagine, on the sacred ground of the famous battle, as the country is reeling and looking for a strong leadership, the new Lincoln is rising. We’ll milk this for all it’s worth!”

“Brilliant! I love it.” Dimon jumped up and walked the room in excitement, pumping his arm.

“What about the logistics? Security?” asked the ever-cautious Bigelow. “We have only a few days to prepare.”

“How’s my Praetorian Guard?” Dimon turned to Johnson. “Are you going to pull this off?”

“We will, Mr. Dimon. FreedomShield has a lot of resources at our disposal. We’ve got you covered.”

“Your ‘resources’ don’t come cheap,” griped Bigelow. “How much will this cost us?”

“I will talk to Erik. We’ll take care of Mr. Dimon,” parried Johnson.

“Thank you, Bob, you guys do take good care of me,” Dimon said. “But the campaign does need money. Chris, we have to more actively reach out to the big donors.”

“We’ve been reaching out, but many of them are either supporting Tice or on the fence because Kron is such a close second.”

“Darn, that Kron keeps getting in the way. He’s got no money, no major backers—how come we can’t shake him off?”

“Well, John, there are some things we can learn from him.” Morton inserted himself into the discussion. “His ‘virtual town hall’ approach proved to be cheap and quite effective. We should start looking for ways to undermine his campaign. Set up some traps, feed disinformation, watch for him to stumble.”

“We can put round-the-clock surveillance on him,” chimed in Johnson.

“Yes, talk to Erik about setting this up.” Dimon nodded. “Now, about Gettysburg and the whole ‘second Lincoln’ theme... can it backfire?”

“No doubt, we have to be careful,” Morton was back in his element. “We’ll just create a setting and under no circumstances use Lincoln’s name. Let others bring it up; we’ll help them. We craft your speech short and sweet. Not as short as the Gettysburg Address, but keep it under a thousand words and fifteen minutes. Don’t get bogged down in details. Look solemn and presidential. A dose of theatrical show will go a long way. Create a sense of danger. Make them feel we need urgent action.”

“And which themes do we hit?”

“The same we’ve been hitting all along: the greatness of America, why our enemies hate us, dealing with them from the position of strength, restoring our natural right to lead. Positive, memorable soundbytes, ideal for the internet. You, looking strong, humble, servant of the people with understated sex appeal. We don’t need a lot of people; just have FreedomShield bring in enough of their ‘volunteers’ to fill the video frame. Then we let Treadwell do his media thing and promote the hell out of it.”

“Sounds good, Jonathan.” Dimon pumped his arm in the air. “Let’s all get to work!”

*Los Angeles, USA*

Maggie looked out the window. Alejandro was outside, talking to men all dressed in workman's clothing, wearing hats and heavy boots. Three pickup trucks were parked there, with what looked like gardening tools in their beds. Two people were carrying packages out of the garage and placing them in trucks. Alejandro was laughing, gesticulating, and patting men on their shoulders. Even in a casual conversation, he stood very straight, with confidence and power. The way he was looking at her last night... she'd have to handle him carefully.

Maggie walked down the stairs and found her way into the kitchen. Seeing David's figure at the counter, she tiptoed in. He was sipping his coffee, staring out the window with thick metal bars. The last two years had been hard on him. He aged, hair turning gray, stooped some more. She knew David held himself responsible for things not working out as planned, for not being able to protect her, for not giving her the child she so desperately wanted. Maggie quietly came to him, put her arms around his waist, squeezed her face into the space between these familiar shoulder blades and closed her eyes.

"All right, lovebirds, you are making me jealous!" Alejandro's voice brought them out of the moment. "How did you sleep?"

They both turned to him. Maggie felt Alejandro looking straight at her, lips curled in a smile, eyes serious.

"I slept like a baby, thank you," said David. "Although, there was a sound in the middle of the night that woke me up. It came with a vibration and felt like an engine was starting."

"Ah, it was the generator," explained Alejandro. "The power grid has not been too reliable lately so we have a combination of solar panels with a battery plus a generator to handle any interruptions. There must have been one during the night. I'm afraid I am used to them by now so I just sleep straight through. We also have a water cistern in the basement. There are ongoing water disputes between Northern and Southern California and sometimes our faucets would run dry. We are set for at least a week here."

“Alejandro, I was curious about the windows,” asked David. “They look kind of dark, like it’s an evening outside even though it’s still early.”

“Good observation. All our windows are covered with a reflective mirror film. These windows are effectively one-way mirrors. You can see outside, nobody can see inside. The windows are also laminated and shatterproof and have external security screen sensors. Yeah, this may seem like overkill but as the old saying goes, *only the paranoid survive*. I’d rather survive. If you can’t live in a gated community with armed guards—and I can’t because of what I do—you’ve got to invest in security. I chose this location because I can run the neighborhood. Still have to be careful.”

Oleg noisily walked in, pulled out a chair and sat at the table.

“All right, how do you get a cup of coffee in this place?”

The next second, he jumped in response to a whirring noise on his left.

“What the...”

What looked like a rectangular column in the corner suddenly came alive with lights and movement, rolled to Oleg and asked in a British-accented voice, “Sir, how do you like your coffee?”

David laughed.

“I had the same reaction. Turns out it’s a kitchen robot.”

“I like mine black,” Oleg cautiously replied to the thing.

“And I want mine with milk and sugar,” Maggie said.

Everyone was looking at the robot while it made some pouring and mixing sounds, then produced two cups full of steaming liquid.

“Thank you, Cumba, now go back to your place,” Alejandro instructed, and the robot returned to the corner and shut down.

“Is that all he does, makes coffee?” asked Oleg.

“No, he can clean floors, set the table, unload the dishwasher, that kind of stuff. Now that you have your coffee, can we go back to my question from yesterday—why are you taking this crazy risk of returning to LA?”

Oleg exchanged glances with the others, sipped his coffee.

“David and Maggie found some new names of those that were involved in the 2019 crisis.”

“Oleg, my friend”—Alejandro sat across from him—“this is old news. Everyone now is angry at the Chinese and the Russians. The narrative is that while there were a few bad apples here in the USA, it was all a foreign staged affair. Most people don’t even care to dig deeper, they are busy trying to survive. College football creates more emotion than a five-year-old financial crisis.”

“Perhaps, but if there is incontrovertible evidence of someone illegally profiting from the crisis—and profiting quite substantially—the information can be used to blackmail such a person.” David sat next to Oleg.

Alejandro shook his head. “David, you don’t strike me as a blackmailing type.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean that we want to blackmail anyone. I meant that someone else can blackmail.”

Maggie jumped in impatiently. “Alejandro, imagine if the president of the United States could be threatened like this! Just imagine the power that a blackmailer would have!”

“Are you saying that President Maxwell has been in on the scheme?” Alejandro asked incredulously. “I am not a fan of his, but I think he is an honest man.”

“No, not Maxwell,” replied David. “Potentially worse and more dangerous. We think that John Dimon was involved.”

Alejandro rubbed his forehead. “He is pretty popular now. Most people think he’ll be the next president. People like what he says and that Robert Treadwell media character is pounding the tables for Dimon. Still, why do you think he is dangerous?”

“He reminds me of the leaders I’ve seen growing up in Eastern Europe.” Maggie had her palms on the table, eyes locked on Alejandro. “Blaming ‘others’ for the problems, simplistic slogans, building up the enemies to focus on rather than looking inside. People like that start wars!”

“OK, OK,” conceded Alejandro. “What do you want to do about this? What can you do? You are right: everything’s been so distorted and compromised that simply publishing this information won’t do any good. He might even spin it to his advantage, proof of ‘enemies’ trying to destroy him.”

“Yes, and I don’t have strong evidence,” David admitted. “No accounts with his name or that of his close relatives.”

“So what do you have?”

David visibly hesitated. “Alejandro, do you want me to get into gory details?”

“Yeah, I’m harboring fugitives, I want all the details!”

David sighed. “All right. I came across a private investment company that seemed to have made some prescient bets in 2019. In looking at the ownership, Dimon’s name came up a year earlier as a beneficial owner, and then disappeared. As I dug in deeper, did some pattern matching, I found names of people linked to Dimon, friends, extended family, this sort of thing. I put together a list of names and companies; there were dozens of accounts indirectly linked to Dimon, with tens of millions in gains during that period.”

“And how were they making money?”

“Companies paid out distributions, dividends, etc. There are a myriad of creative ways to do that, without raising questions. But there was another bothersome issue: many transactions we could not trace because the trail ended up at SOFI.”

“Who is she?”

Maggie laughed, then explained, “It’s not a ‘she.’ The SOFI is an acronym for the system of exchanging financial information, *systema obmena finansovoy informatszi* in Russian. You see, until 2015 the vast majority of such data was communicated through the SWIFT, Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications. For a banking institution to succeed in a global environment, it had to be a part of the SWIFT. Which in turn helped law enforcement to track down money laundering. At some point the US started using access to the SWIFT as a weapon, blocking the Iranians from the system. And when in 2015 they tried to block the Russians as a part of the standoff over Ukraine, Russia deployed its own interbank system and called it SOFI. The rest of the BRICS countries—China, India, Brazil, and South Africa – also adopted the SOFI as a second interbank system and tied it to the hundred billion dollars New Development Bank they set up in Shanghai that year.”

“And why is that a problem?”

“Now we have two separate systems that are opaque to each other. Moreover, in order to entice people to join the SOFI, Russia imposed very tight data security. Only a few people in the BRICS leadership can access the transactions data,” Maggie continued. “After the SOFI gained adoption with banks covering half of the world’s population, in 2018 the SWIFT had no choice but to agree to establish a number of gateways to the SOFI so at least some authorized transactions for the banks participating in both systems can go across. But once the transaction goes into the SOFI, it might as well fall into a black hole. We can’t trace it any further. Quite a bit of the data that Schulmann collected back in 2020 stops at the border to the SOFI.”

“And why is this important?”

“It implies a possible funding from abroad. Which would be not only suspicious, but likely outright illegal.”

“So what are you going to do?”

David jumped back in. “We really have two separate issues here. First, we worked with Schulmann’s data that only goes through early 2020. I want more transaction data for the accounts that I have identified, going to the current year. A person with a proper security access, such as the SEC or the FBI, should be able to get it. Second, we would like to peek behind the SOFI’s veil. That would be harder.”

“And once you have such data?”

“We think that if we gather enough evidence, we should get to the top. Perhaps even to Maxwell,” David said. “He can stop Dimon.”

“Look, you’ll be surprised, but we have developed quite a bit of computer expertise here. However, getting this kind of data is beyond our reach.” Alejandro shook his head. “How are you planning to get it?”

“Two years ago, Maggie and I were in Dallas, following Schulmann’s trail. His friend John Platt guided us; we would have never found the file without him. Platt got help from the head of a local FBI office, Jim Brobak. We thought of trying to find Jim again; we’re just not sure how.”

“Why not ask that Platt guy?”

“John Platt was killed a few days after meeting with us.”

“Yes, helping you can be dangerous.” Alejandro nodded. “I’ll see if we can find a way to Mr. Brobak, assuming he is still alive. But even if we do, how do you get to the president?”

“Well, that’s where things get interesting.” Oleg, who’d been listening quietly until now, spoke up. “When I was a teenager in St. Petersburg, every year on June twenty-second my uncle would take me and his son to the Museum of Breaking the Leningrad Blockade.”

“Why June twenty-second?”

“That’s the day that Nazi Germany attacked Russia. The four of us—my uncle, his father, his son, and me—would get into his car and drive to Shlisselburg, where the museum is located. That one year, in 2006, it was crowded because we had another passenger, Pavel Rostin. I remember because Rostin was a subject of conversations between my uncle and his father for a few years afterwards.”

“OK, who is Pavel Rostin and why does it matter?”

“Pavel Rostin was married to Karen Baker, the daughter of Sam Baker. One of the longest serving US congressmen, head of powerful committees.”

“So you want to contact Pavel Rostin and through him get to Sam Baker?” asked Alejandro.

“Pavel Rostin died—or, likely, was killed—a few days after I met him. He left behind a wife and two children, a boy and a girl.”

“I am completely lost.” Alejandro shook his head.

“You heard of Jeff Kron? Yes, that Jeff Kron, the presidential candidate. Jeff’s wife Jennifer’s maiden name is Rostin.”

“So you want to contact Jennifer Kron in order to convince her grandfather to take the information to Maxwell? Or you want Jeff Kron to go after Dimon?”

“Yeah, whichever one works.”

“Why do you think Jennifer Kron would even talk to you?”

“I don’t know if she will. The fact that I’ve met her father, who died under suspicious circumstances soon thereafter, might help to get her interest. And her husband is Dimon’s political rival. Kron hates what Dimon stands for. He called Dimon a ‘dangerous demagogue.’ Jennifer must feel the same way. If we convince her that

we are who we are and the information is genuine, perhaps she'll help us. To be believed, David, Maggie and I have to do this in person."

Alejandro sat quietly for a minute, a frown creasing his handsome face. He then looked up:

"It makes some sense, but overall I'd say it's crazy. Too many dependencies, too many things must fall into place. Too risky. I'm sorry, but I think you are better off going back to Mexico."

He got up to walk away. Maggie stood up and grabbed his arm.

"Alejandro, please, help us. Please. I know we'll need some luck to make this happen. We've earned that luck. You helped us two years ago—do it again, I beg you."

Alejandro hesitated, looked at her through narrowed eyes for a minute.

"All right, I guess we can give it a try. Worse comes to worst, she won't talk to you. The Krons are now public figures; I am sure they are being followed. We'll have to be careful and creative. Is this it, or do you have other insane ideas up your sleeve?"

"Well, there is one more possibility, but it's a really long shot," Oleg admitted sheepishly.

"Given how realistic your other approaches are, I wonder what a long shot would look like. What is it?"

"I mentioned my uncle and his son. Their family has been in the *militzia*, the Russian term for police, for many generations. My uncle, Ivan Mershov, now heads the SBOR, Special Rapid Response Unit within the Russian Interior Ministry. He just might be high enough to help us get these SOFI transactions traced. Or get the word to their president."

"And their president will believe this and decide to contact our president and then our president will just believe their president with our two countries being in a new Cold War? Yeah, that's a very long shot for sure." Alejandro chuckled.

"I told you." Oleg shrugged.

"All right." Alejandro turned serious again. "Now that I know why you risked coming back, here are some ground rules. Number one, you are not to leave this house unless we arrange it in advance. Number two, you can only use secure phones and e-mail. I will show you how. This is for your protection as well as mine. Surveillance

systems have gotten much better while you were gone. There are tens of millions of high-resolution cameras throughout the city. There are hundreds of observation drones overhead with dozens of video and infrared cameras. They are all plugged into massive databases that enable face recognition within a second. Mostly this is being used to sell you stuff, to personalize the advertising process. But it also serves law enforcement. On the positive side, the violent crime is down thirty percent in two years. On the negative side, it's hard to be out without being recognized."

"But we had three plastic surgeries, we can wear a disguise. We beat the system back in 2022," protested Maggie.

"I know you did. But the person recognition systems are now more capable. They look at a larger number of characteristics than the ones you beat before, and they take into account possible changes and disguises. I don't know how hard they are still looking for you, but I doubt that your profiles are no longer active in their searches. It's enough for one of you to trip an alarm somewhere."

"So this house is our jail?" Oleg's eyes narrowed. "You gonna keep us under lock and key?"

"No, come on, that's not what I said! Nobody's gonna jail you. I said we have to be careful. We have to plan your leaving the house. You must allow us to keep you safe."

"Of course, Alejandro," David agreed. "We greatly appreciate your help."

*Beijing, China*

Hundreds, no—thousands—of people poured out of Liangmaqiao subway station, joining a mighty human river flowing down the boulevard. The volunteers were handing out Chinese flags and bottles of water. The crowd was roaring with angry chants.

Jia Kecheng came with his family. He knew that's what was expected of him, a mid-level functionary in the People's Liberation Army. As a colonel in the General Staff's Mobilization and Logistics Department, he was not in a position to stay away. At least he was entitled to march in a privileged group, without being cattle-prodded into holding areas of the carefully staged demonstration. Jia, with his wife and son, marched up the boulevard under a giant "Death to US Imperialism!" poster. When approaching the US embassy, they stopped, shouted mandatory abuses at the building, then turned around and came back down the other side of the road. The closed-circuit cameras mounted all around had captured his presence and it was recorded in some distant computer. Another little notch in his "politically reliable" resume.

As they were marching back, Jia watched the throngs of protesters heading towards the embassy. They were mostly young people, whipped into a frenzy, singing the Chinese national anthem and punching their clenched fists in the air. The fifth day of demonstrations over a minor incident where the American and Chinese planes came close, but did not collide, over the South China Sea. The protests were described as spontaneous. *Yes, they are as spontaneous as a military parade*, thought Jia. The government encouraged the protesters and blocked off the streets for them. People were told to leave work and go demonstrate. If you did not, if one of the closed-circuit cameras did not record your presence, that would become a black mark on your record.

What amazed Jia was the real rage expressed by the protesters. Despite everyone knowing that they were a part of a staged theater, that they were doing their government's bidding, the protesters

became overcome with palpable anger at the *dirty Americans* that had been trying to humiliate China for many years. A few weeks ago the same marchers were indignant at their own government. The government that only two years ago sent tanks against its own people, not far from here. Jia shook his head, thinking how potent nationalism was and how people could be manipulated by appealing to their national pride.

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jeff Kron's campaign headquarters were located in a former "shared office space" in Culver City. These spaces had sprouted like weeds during the second internet boom in the middle of the previous decade. Increased telecommuting and the 2019 financial crisis killed many of them. Robert Marosyan, Jeff's campaign manager, liked the space for its openness and extensive computer cabling. And because it was only a few blocks from Jeff and Jennifer's house where Marosyan often stayed. Jeff didn't like it, but then he thought that his house was a perfect place to run a presidential campaign from and renting this warehouse-type facility was a massive waste of funds that the Reform Party didn't have. Marosyan begged and pleaded for weeks until Jeff relented.

Jeff scowled at his own posters as he and Jennifer walked into the huge open space.

"They made me look like some kind of tenth century saint! In this day and age, who needs posters anyway?"

"Don't worry, nobody will mistake you for a saint," said Marosyan, a thin, nervous man with an unruly mop of jet-black hair. "And yes, with all the social media and virtual town halls, we still need old-fashioned posters."

Jennifer stood in front of the offending object and thoughtfully drummed slim fingers against her lips.

"I agree with Jeff. This background, this faraway look on Jeff's face..."

Marosyan started biting his fingernails.

"These have been approved already and printed and distributed and..."

"All right, all right, Robert, I'm just teasing you." Jennifer hugged Marosyan and kissed him on the ear. "You know that Jeff doesn't like any of his pictures. He doesn't like attracting attention."

"Yes, he is the only political candidate I've ever met that doesn't like attention." Robert nodded sorrowfully. "Some days I wonder why I am bothering to run his campaign."

“Because you believe in him?” Jennifer smiled.

“I do,” Marosyan agreed and pointed at the back of Jeff Kron, who was out of the earshot shaking hands with his campaign workers. “I hope he believes in himself as much as I believe in him.”

A blond man in his twenties waited for them in a conference room. Upon seeing Jeff and Jennifer, he stood up, knocking down his cup of coffee in the process.

“O-o-ops!”

“David, don’t worry about it. It’s so good to see you!” Jennifer laughed, hugged the man—who turned out to be skinny and tall—and helped him clean up the mess on the table.

She then turned to Marosyan. “Robert, please meet our dear and somewhat awkward friend, David Weinstein.”

“Nice to meet you, Robert.” David extended his hand. He had a slight but noticeable accent.

“Nice to meet you. Where are you from?”

David looked at Jennifer questioningly.

“It’s a bit of a story,” she told Robert. “You see, David is a son of my father’s college friend in Moscow. David’s father is an American and David moved here after finishing high school. He recently finished his PhD in political economics and, instead of chasing big bucks on Wall Street, volunteered to join Jeff’s campaign.”

David smiled. “Jennifer is omitting a few important details. First, it was Jennifer’s father Pavel that enabled me to come here. He left my mother a substantial sum of money when he died in 2006. My natural father never helped me financially. When I came to the U.S. nine years ago—too late, I am afraid, to lose my accent—I sought out Jennifer to thank her. Jeff and Jennifer practically adopted me, helped me with college. I slept on their couch for months. And I did not volunteer—I begged them to let me work on Jeff’s campaign.”

“Well, Dr. Weinstein, welcome to the team!” Marosyan smiled back at him. “Happy to have someone with your credentials.”

He turned to Jeff.

“Speaking of credentials, where is your VP Dr. Moonson?”

“He couldn’t make it, not feeling well.”

“I wish we could have designated Jennifer as a VP. She has great name recognition,” Marosyan said.

“Why couldn’t you?” David asked.

“Electoral college laws. Electors can’t vote for two people from their state. We didn’t want to risk losing California,” explained Robert. “So we ended up with Dr. Moonson, who doesn’t help the ticket much.”

“That’s OK, Robert.” Jennifer waved her hand in a *don’t worry* gesture. “People vote for the president, not the VP. Anyway, there is a reason David is here. I asked him to talk to us about the emerging socio-economic landscape of the country so we can fine-tune our economic message.”

“Well, I guess that would be useful,” allowed Marosyan not too happily. “But I wish you would talk some sense into your husband about running this campaign to win. I mean, we have the polling data we should be using to fine-tune our messaging, we have the backers that are willing to throw money at us...”

“Robert, don’t start this again!” Jeff waved his hand. “I want to win, but I want to win the right way. I will take no money from special interests; I want to rid the country of their influence. I will not change my message based on polling. There are millions of people that believed what I wrote and what I said. They follow me because of that. We will build our coalition around them, not by betraying their trust.”

“Who said anything about betraying anyone?” screamed Marosyan in frustration. “I’m talking about doing some professional campaigning, the kind you hired me for!”

“See, David, that’s the zoo you signed up for.” Jennifer put her arm around David. “It’s not too late to walk away and grab that high-paying job on Wall Street.”

“Oh no, not in a million years,” exclaimed David.

“So, do you have some ideas for us?” asked Jeff.

“Oh yes.” David’s eyes lit up. “I wrote down a few suggestions.” He grabbed a slightly coffee-sogged folder on the table in front of him. “The society has become—”

Marosyan cut him off. “It’s all well and good, but the timing sucks. We have an electronic town hall in twenty minutes.”

David sat down, visibly deflated.

“It’s my fault, bad scheduling,” Jennifer apologized. “David, Robert, why don’t you come over for dinner tomorrow night and we’ll give David the floor. Are you both available?”

David and Robert nodded.

“Great, we have a plan. Now, let’s go to the studio.” Kron got up. “David, welcome to the team.”

*Los Angeles, USA*

“We found Jim Brobak,” Alejandro announced. “He is now in Farmington, New Mexico.”

David sprang from his seat. “How can I contact him?”

“With caution,” replied Alejandro. He nodded at the phone in the middle of the table between them. “If he is willing to talk to you, this phone should ring fairly soon.”

“Why?”

“This phone is ‘encryption paired’ to another phone that was delivered to Jim Brobak a few minutes ago. They are hard-wired to the same encryption key. A very long encryption key that would take years to break via brute force. You can’t extract the key without destroying the phone. The phones are delivered physically; no keys get exchanged over the internet. The encrypted conversation goes over the internet using TOR-3A, the latest version of the secure router, making it very difficult to determine the location of the caller or the recipient.”

“How did you come up with all this?” Oleg’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“It was partly TV that gave me this idea.” Alejandro turned the TV on, and a projection appeared on the wall and a seductive if slightly robotic female voice started praising wonderful deals in the neighborhood while images of stores and restaurants in the vicinity were flashing on the screen.

“This is an older model,” explained Alejandro. “The new, immersive ones have image and voice recognition built in so they will tailor the programming and advertising to whoever is in the room. A couple of years ago it totally spooked me when I went to visit a friend and the damn TV started addressing me by name and offering me a special at a gym club. They even added that the gym had two hundred seventy four unattached blonde female members between ages of eighteen and twenty-five.”

“So they knew you like them young and blonde?” Maggie laughed.

“I do prefer blondes”—Alejandro lowered his head in her direction and Maggie blushed—“but it was the fact that they tracked exactly where I was and what I like. And that’s where I got my business idea. That, and the identity change that Javier did for you two years ago. This data is all supposed to be private, but do you really trust it to be? There was a well-publicized disclosure where the law enforcement gained real-time access to this supposedly marketing data to ‘track terrorists and enforce the law.’”

The TV advertising stopped and was replaced with images of AeroCars racing furiously above and between buildings, engines roaring. “*Fast and Furious 17*,” said the caption.

“So what was your business idea?”

“I am oversimplifying, but let’s say we provide privacy and ‘identity protection’ services. Help people ‘drop out.’”

“Drop out?”

“Yeah, it’s the term we use. Although ‘opt out’ might be more appropriate. You see, some people just don’t want their appliances spying on them. That’s more of an ‘opt out’ thing. Others try to ‘get off the grid’ completely, to minimize their data footprint. We help.”

“How?”

“Take me, for example. I made sure there are no image and voice recognition devices in any of my places. I do a daily electronic sweep for suspicious gadgets. I use wearable devices only when I am sure they are not transmitting my location data out. License plates on all my cars are shielded to give video cameras distorted readings. My glasses, hats, shirts all have miniature devices that detect the presence of camera sensors and direct a pulsing light back at them, distorting any imagery. And I carry an electronic voice changer with me for other eventualities. I surf the internet anonymously, using browsers with TOR-3A built-in. All my voice and e-mail communication is encrypted using long-length codes that change daily. My kitchen robot Cumba has been modified to not store or send any household information out.”

“Even your robot?”

“Yes, absolutely. We let robots into our homes, they work for us, and we think they are ours. But they have their ‘eyes,’ they have their ‘ears,’ and people who built them can see what they see, can

hear what they hear. And if their makers have the information, it means the government also has access. I allow diagnostic data to go back, but nothing else.”

“Isn’t this a lot of daily work?” asked Maggie.

“Not really, once we set people up with secure apps, much of this happens automatically. The trick is that we do it for them once and then we are on call, to help as needed. When people download or search for privacy apps or devices themselves, the government knows about it and potentially starts tracking them. We do the setup off-net. And people themselves are now getting smarter about avoiding devices that spy on them. A year ago, the Feds tried to convict someone using data captured from a backdoor in his phone. In three days, that phone manufacturer’s sales collapsed.”

“And how many people do this?”

“A minority, perhaps one in ten. You see, it’s convenient to remain ‘in the system’—you don’t even have to carry identification or credit cards any longer, just allow your iris to be scanned and you can buy things, the money will be automatically deducted from your account. But our business is growing fast: people usually start with ‘opting out’ from being recognized by their devices because of annoying advertising and then decide they don’t want to have their lives recorded.”

“If it’s so convenient, why opt out?”

“People are starting to value their privacy over convenience. We are humans, we all have something to hide, and we want some parts of our lives to be ours. Besides, with all the rules and regulations, each and every one of us has violated something at some point in time. They hear stories about others being questioned for things they did in private. Collect enough data and everyone is guilty. They don’t want to live in fear. For those that decide to drop out completely, there is a whole decentralized economy that evolved in parallel to the official one. It does not have as many conveniences, but it’s outside of the government’s eye.”

The phone on the table began to vibrate, stopping the conversation in its tracks.

*Farmington, USA*

Jim Brobak didn't really care for his days off. Not in this empty rental house. Not since Janet left and took the kids. Ran back to her rich daddy in Dallas. She hated the move to New Mexico. She didn't want to be the wife of a resident special agent in a sleepy little town. She mocked it as a place of 'UFO-obsessed baseball fans.' As if he had a choice. As if he asked to be demoted and sent here. The divorce papers were lying on the sofa, right where he threw them two weeks ago when they arrived. Janet had left three messages by now.

It was only 11 a.m., but he was already nursing a glass of bourbon in the dusty backyard, looking at gravel, withered grass, and cactuses. He didn't expect anyone, so sounds of people talking startled Jim. He walked over to the front yard and came face-to-face with a gardening crew.

"Hey, I didn't ask for gardeners. And if that vulture landlady wants to send anyone, she has to call me first."

"No problem, *señor*, no problem, we go," agreed the older gardener, a short man with a withered face darkened by the New Mexico sun. "We go. This—for you." He pushed a brown manila envelope into Brobak's hands.

"What? What is this? Why are you giving this to me?" uttered a surprised Jim, but the crew quickly piled into a beat-up truck and left.

Jim shook his head and looked at the front of the envelope. It was indeed addressed to him. Probably another one of Janet's tricks. He went back into the backyard, threw the envelope on the table and resumed his bourbon.

Something didn't feel right. The landlady was stingy as hell, wouldn't even replace a burned-out light bulb. And if she did send the gardening crew, why did they leave so quickly—was he that scary? Jim looked at the envelope and his eyes narrowed: it had no return address and no stamp. *What the hell?*

Brobak pushed aside the glass with bourbon, studied the envelope for a couple of minutes, then carefully picked it up and looked at the other side. Just a regular manila envelope. Something

was inside, an object the size of a phone. He listened; there was no ticking or other suspicious sounds.

Jim went to the kitchen, brought scissors, and at an arm's length delicately opened the package. No powder. He gingerly shook the envelope and an object slid out. It was indeed a phone with a small yellow sticker. The sticker read: "From friends of John Platt."

John Platt. His late long-time friend. The man who got involved in investigating the Schulmann affair and asked Jim to help. The man whose plane crashed only a few days after that. The man who changed Jim's life, because it was helping Platt that got him demoted and transferred out of Dallas. Nobody said it outright, but Jim knew it. Which set in motion another chain of events, culminating in the divorce papers on the sofa.

Jim had the urge to throw the phone over the backyard fence, into the empty field outside. Let rattlesnakes and scorpions use it. He picked up the phone, then stopped. John didn't do this to him. John tried to investigate a friend's death and got killed. Because Jim didn't for a second believe that the plane crash a few days later was a coincidence. And who were those "friends" that sent Jim the phone? When the Schulmann file story broke, Jim figured that John's "associates" must have been David Ferguson and Maggie Sappin. Officially, fugitives on the run wanted for questioning. Unofficially, to a great many, heroes that stood up to powerful people that considered themselves to be above the law. Were they the "friends" trying now to contact Jim?

Jim studied the phone. It was a no-name brand. There would be only one reason to send him the phone rather than a number to call: security. No online key distribution. Probably built-in strong encryption. Working for the FBI, he was familiar with such devices. One of the costliest but also highly protected ways to communicate remotely. They tried to crack down on such devices, but it was next to impossible. And now he was going to use one himself?

Jim turned the phone on. It powered up. There were no messages of any kind. He opened the address book; it had one name—"JohnP"—and a number with a Newfoundland area code. It did not matter what the area code was, must be a gateway that would securely route packetized calls, bounce them across multiple servers in different areas, and re-assemble packets at the destination without allowing anyone to trace it. Jim gulped down the rest of the bourbon and pressed the number.

A man's voice answered.

"Jim?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

The call must have been bounced between many servers because even with fiber-optic connections the delay was noticeably annoying.

"This is David Ferguson."

*As I expected*, thought Jim, feeling cold in the pit of his stomach.

"What do you want?"

"I need your help. I am sure you've heard of me. Two years ago, you helped John Platt evade the police. I was with him."

"Go on."

"I have continued working on the Schulmann file. I uncovered something that might be very important, but I need more data. We don't have the kind of access required to get it. You probably do."

"Why did you come to me?"

"Because John Platt was your friend. Because you helped us before. We can't trust anyone else with such a request."

"John was killed because of this!"

"I know. So were many others. Working on this is dangerous. I came out of hiding and returned to the US so we could get this information. It's that important."

Jim took a deep breath, anger rising.

"I lost my job and my family because of you!"

He ended the connection.

*St. Petersburg, Russia*

Vitaly Mershov was having lunch with two fellow *militziya* investigators in an open beer bar near Kutuzov Embankment. With this being a hot day, his two colleagues were already on their third beer while Vitaly, the youngest of the three, still nursed his first one.

An observation drone was circling about three hundred feet overhead, making an annoying mosquito-like noise.

“Vitaly, you know something about these drone things,” Petr, the oldest of the group, half asked, half stated.

“A little bit,” Vitaly cautiously replied. The older *militziyamen* were suspicious of the new technology so he was careful in his answers.

“How often do they break down and stop recording or sending data out?”

“Not too often. They seem to work just fine most of the time.”

“Isn’t it interesting then that the drone in the area broke down just before the murder of Defense Minister Nedinsky?” Slava, Petr’s partner, slurred. “Went dark, no video, no alerts.”

“So how did you know to get there?”

“They sent us to investigate a domestic disturbance a couple of blocks away. We were talking to an old fool who’s been beating his wife for years. Neighbors called us, but she refused to say anything,” explained Petr. “Suddenly, we heard gunshots. We ran out, looked left, looked right, saw where people were running away from and went there. Found the minister’s car, the minister, and one of his bodyguards dead in the back seat. The other bodyguard was standing outside. Covered in blood and glass, but seemed OK.”

“Did you talk to him?” asked Vitaly.

“Briefly. He gave us his name, Fyodor Bezdorukov, but then clamped down, saying he is only supposed to talk to special police.”

“I would have shown him special police,” said Slava, who in his spare time taught martial arts, “but that FSB colonel showed up and told us to get out.”

“And you left?”

“He had a bunch of heavily armed people with him. Come to think of it, he got there pretty damn quickly. I mean, we were in the area. Petr, how long did it take us to get there?”

“Perhaps three minutes or so,” said Petr. “And that SOB Zaychikov was only a couple of minutes behind us. How could he get there so quickly?”

“Zaychikov is the FSB colonel’s name?”

“Yes, Bogdan Zaychikov. He introduced himself when he told us to get out. Now that I look back at it, the whole thing stank. Slava, you were a sniper in the army—could you have taken out the minister and his bodyguard in a back seat of a bullet-resistant car?”

“Not easily.” Slava shook his head. “Even with high-powered 50 caliber rifles you have to put in a few shots in the same area before you shatter the glass. So the driver would have had a chance to get out of there.”

“But they told us that the minister’s car was blocked by trucks in the front and the back?” asked Vitaly.

“There were trucks there, but there was room for the car to maneuver. And why was the car on that small street in the first place?” Petr said. “Anyway, they told us it’s not our case to worry about.”

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jennifer smiled at two men in a Jeep as she walked to the next door neighbor's. They waved back at her. Familiar faces, they'd been here before, guarding Jeff.

The door opened before she had a chance to knock.

"Hi, Jenny. I saw you from the kitchen window."

"Thank you, Betty. Returning this," Jennifer offered her neighbor the virtual reality contraption she'd borrowed. VR goggles, as they were called.

"How was the kitchen pipe fixing?"

"Actually, once I put the goggles on and turned on the program, quite easy. I still got wet, but I did not have to beg Jeff or call the plumber."

"Come on in. Have a glass of ice tea," offered Betty. She was a plump woman with short curly hair, whose grandmotherly appearance hid a bit of a temper. Neighbors that crossed her found out Betty's steely side rather quickly. But Betty seemed to have a soft spot for Jeff and Jennifer ever since they moved next door some years back. "That hubby of yours, he is a dreamer," Betty used to tell Jennifer. "But a nice one."

"Do you have time, Jenny?" asked Betty halfway to the kitchen. "I am an old fool, bored while Bob is at work. You must have tons of things to worry about with all that you have to do these days."

"Don't worry, Betty. I have people coming for dinner in a while, but I've ordered takeout; no cooking for me today."

"Well, here's your glass then. No sugar, as you like it. How are you holding up?"

"Barely, to be honest. I stopped working and sent Nana to live with my mom months ago. There is no time for anything. I try to do a bit of gardening when I can, so I don't just lose it. It all feels very surreal."

"Yeah, I think the whole neighborhood feels this way. Who would have thought that we'd have a presidential candidate in our midst, living in a small ranch-style house. Presidential candidates are supposed to live in mansions, in gated communities, surrounded by other rich people and bodyguards."

“Betty, should have we moved out? I mean, this must be very inconvenient and bothersome for people.”

“No, don’t think that way! Of course, there are some that are grumbling, but most of the neighbors are proud. Look at all the *Kron for President* signs on the lawns. They won’t tell it to you, but many came to tell me how grand it is that someone like them has a chance to be the President.”

“There are some *Dimon for President* signs too.”

“Yeah, you can’t really blame them. I reckon, one in five working people here lost their good-paying jobs and either work for less or live on what they get from the government. They look for someone to blame and Dimon tells them who to blame.”

“Betty, thank you for the tea.” Jennifer put the glass down. “And for the talk. I wonder every day if we are doing the right thing.”

“Take care of yourself, Jenny. You go, girl!”

Jennifer stood on the street for a minute, looking at their house. Yep, a tired small three-bedroom ranch house. Comfortable like an old shoe. Completely unsuitable for a presidential candidate. But then, they were an unsuitable candidate. *They* because it truly was both of them. Once Jeff’s popularity started rising, he’d been offered mansions to stay in. He always refused with *That’s just not us*. That was true; they had no great ambitions, no desire to rule. They had kind of fallen into the situation, one step at a time. “Accidental politicians,” a wisecracking scribe called them, and the label stuck, sometimes used with sympathy, sometimes derogatorily.

“Well, this was tasty! Thank you.” Robert Marosyan nodded in Jennifer’s direction.

“Why, Robert, you’re quite welcome. I would have gladly taken the credit, but I must admit that the food came from a local Italian restaurant.

Jeff and David Weinstein laughed.

“All right, David, now that we’ve fed you, share with us your politico-economic thoughts,” said Jeff.

“Well, there are a few interconnected trends that are unfolding right before our eyes.” David’s voice changed, as if going from a

dinner chitchat to a serious discussion required a different timbre. “The main thing is, our society has become very stratified. We have a tiny minority, perhaps one hundredth of one percent, that has it all and can spend money like water. Then, there is a reasonably well-to-do class, perhaps twenty percent of the population, with well-paying jobs that could not be outsourced or automated. And after that, there is everyone else, struggling to stay afloat. That’s partly the result of our increasingly digital ‘winner take all’ economy, and partly due to growing automation. There are jobs out there, just not many good, well-paying jobs. While manufacturing came back after the dollar crashed, the jobs did not. There are robots everywhere. Not only in factories, but also in department stores and fast-food restaurants. You walk into a store and a robot is greeting you, not a person. And many of the jobs that have not been automated just don’t pay as much. A radiologist in the Philippines can get an X-ray just as quickly as the one in downtown LA and read it just as well... now you are suddenly competing with someone whose cost of living is much lower.”

“We know all that,” grumbled Marosyan. “And we still have the greatest companies in the world.”

“Yes, but only a small minority can work for these companies. This lack of good jobs creates a negative socio-economic feedback loop. First, the mass market starts shrinking because one super-rich person does not replace the purchasing performance of ten middle class people that lost their well-paying jobs. Second, the big money drives politics and the social trust starts disappearing. Once people stop trusting the government, they try to avoid financially supporting it. The government tries to enforce more, people trust it even less, and on and on it goes.”

“Yeah, yeah, we know about the *No taxation without representation* movement, the signs and graffiti are all over the place now.” Marosyan shrugged.

“That’s a part of it. Increasingly more people are reassessing their priorities, working less or dropping out of the work force altogether. When you realize that even if you work your butt off your chances of making it big are really miniscule, you may decide it’s not worth it. And even if you claw your way into the middle class, you

find out that you pay tons of taxes but get little in benefits. People are starting to look at their quality of life differently. They consume less; they take government assistance. More than half of the country is on food stamps now. And they share. Local communities are really big now. Cars are expensive, so people share them. It's common now for neighbors to buy one or more cars together. They grow and share food, they help each other. The underground local economy is growing by leaps and bounds, enabled by online sharing platforms and cryptocurrencies that allow people to build neighborhood-based economic communities.”

“Hmmm, so you are saying that people are increasingly transacting locally, away from the big government, away from the ‘official’ market?” asked Kron.

“Yes, but even more than that. It's very exciting to observe!” David shook his index finger in the air. “You see, this is more than an economic phenomenon, this is a societal phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, a man was rooted in his local community; he had connections, a structure, a place. In the Modern Age, we have increasingly subordinated the individual as a means to economic ends. We tore people out of their local structures and the man had no defined place. As the majority of the population has been falling behind, their feelings of powerlessness and aloneness have increased. In the twentieth century, such people escaped by conforming or submitting to a strong leader. And we see these trends now too; just look at Dimon's popularity. The internet connected people like never before, but it also created echo-chambers of like-minded individuals reinforcing each other's views. The world has become both very interconnected and very fragmented. But we also see a strong movement to reconstruct local communities. These are very different and conflicting trends. Something quite profound is happening as people use less of remote social media connections and turn back to in-person associations.”

“Well, David, if you had a carte blanche to change things, how would you try to reverse this downward spiral we are in?” Jennifer leaned towards David, listening intently.

“We must earn people's trust anew. And in order to do that, I think we have to embrace the localization that's unfolding. Instead of

only taking money out of the communities we should start returning it to them to spend as the communities see fit. Help rebuild the middle class; it's the very cornerstone of democracy. Get big money out of politics and people may start seeing the government as an ally again."

"It's all very nice, but I don't know how to turn it into an ad or a billboard," Marosyan said. "One has to win the election first."

"I know, you are right, Robert," said Jeff. "But like that old sailor Popeye, I am what I am. And to your great frustration, I have to run the way I am. Don't be angry with me. I've warned you."

"That you did." Marosyan nodded.

*Los Angeles, USA*

Maggie was sitting in the living room with headphones on and eyes closed, quietly swaying to music. Another dream of driving last night. She was in a car with the top down driving on a mountain road at night, trees on one side, a sharp drop on the other. A powerful engine purrs. Suddenly, her headlights start growing dimmer. Soon, she can see only a few feet ahead. The car won't slow down. She has to pull over, but there is no shoulder as the road is heading downhill. She can't see where the next turn is, cringes in anticipation, hits the steering wheel—and suddenly the headlights are back on and she sees the road twisting just in time as she manages the car through the next turn.

She did not hear Alejandro coming in, watching her. Finally, he gently touched her arm and she came about.

“Alejandro!”

“Maggie.” Low, silky voice. “What are you listening to?”

“It's an old Russian and Georgian poet. Bulat Okudzhava.”

“Can I listen?”

Maggie switched her phone from Bluetooth to a speaker and sounds of a guitar with a halting man's voice filled the room.

“What is he saying?”

“Let me see, I'll try to translate.”

Maggie switched to the beginning of the song and slowly spelled it out in English:

*In times of pain and bloodshed,  
When showers of steel  
Pummel us  
Without mercy  
And the leaders can't be heard,  
People listen  
To the little orchestra of hope  
Being conducted by love.*

“Is that what you are thinking, Maggie?”

“Yes, Alejandro. A little orchestra of Hope with Love as a conductor.”

“What do you hope for?”

“I hope for peace, Alejandro. I hope for a normal life. I hope for a baby. I hope to stop running.”

“Is that why you are here?”

“Yes, Alejandro. I am tired. We came back in order to resolve this, to put an end to running.”

Alejandro got up, took Maggie’s hand, kissed it.

“I will protect you. I can give you peace. I can give you everything you want.”

After he left, she sat there looking out the darkened windows. *I will protect you.* By “you,” he meant her, Maggie. Not Maggie and David. That much was clear. She turned the music back on.

*It's painful to pay for our mistakes,  
I hope to be able to smile through the torment.*

*Laguna Beach, USA*

The former carpool lane was given to driverless cars. Jennifer watched in wonderment the procession of cars with telltale humps on the roof. In theory, these cars were supposed to whizz by at high speed with only ten to fifteen feet separating cars. In practice, having to get out of the fast lane into regular traffic slowed things down considerably.

She did not feel quite ready to hand over driving to the machine. Besides, they did not have the money for a new car anyway. Jeff had to stop working two years ago when politics—‘the movement’ as he called it—began taking all of his time. She also had to quit last December, as Jeff needed her help. She was the one person he trusted the most. Jeff agreed to take a token salary as the head of the Reform party, but they primarily lived off their savings. At least their election-related travel expenses were being paid for.

Tomorrow, they were going to leave for the East Coast, to have some meetings and to give an interview to a TV network. And visit her father’s grave, as they did every year. Today, she was driving to see their daughter, Nana. They named her Nastya after Jennifer’s grandmother on the father’s side, but as Nastya was learning to talk she kept referring to herself as Nana and it stuck. It’d been six months since they sent Nana to live with Jennifer’s mom and grandfather. Jennifer kept reminding herself that this was done for Nana’s safety, but she could not shake off the feeling of guilt toward her daughter.

Jennifer steered their old car into a parking space in front of Sam Baker’s house on Ocean Way. As she walked into the house, a man blocked her way. He looked at her suspiciously, then with a glimpse of recognition stepped to the side and motioned for her to go in.

Nana ran out.

“Mom!”

Mother and daughter embraced and rocked quietly for a minute, squeezing each other hard, reconnecting. Then Nana untangled herself.

“I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” Jennifer choked out. *I want my life back, the life without threats, without having to send my daughter away!*

“Grandma is on the patio.”

“Who’s that man at the door?”

“Oh, we have three security guards now. Everybody in the neighborhood has guards.”

Nana led Jennifer into the house and they made their way to the familiar huge patio overlooking Woods Cove.

Karen Baker was there with Caroline, a local woman Karen had befriended after she moved here three years ago. Caroline was in her early fifties, but she neither looked nor acted her age: a big smile, a mop of soft blond hair, a surfboard in a puddle of water in the corner, a whiff of weed in the air.

Jennifer went over and gave her mother a brief peck on the cheek.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, baby,” answered Karen without getting up.

“Good to see you, Caroline.” Jennifer smiled.

“Hi, Jennifer! Wanna reefer?” Caroline giggled.

“No, thank you.”

“If you are worried about your husband’s political career, weed’s been legalized, you know.” Caroline enjoyed teasing Jennifer.

“No thank you anyway. How’s the dating life?”

“Oh, you know, men... Surfing is so much more fun. Although men are good for a couple of things. Replacing light bulbs is one.”

“And the other?”

“Oh, you know. Although I have tried one of these new virtual reality suits recently, so perhaps even that is no longer necessary.” Caroline laughed.

“Really? How was it?” Karen got interested.

“I’ll tell you after Nana here leaves.”

Poor Nana blushed, her face turning crimson.

“Don’t make fun of my granddaughter,” protested Karen, laughing. Then she turned to Jennifer:

“How are you holding up, honey?”

“OK, mom, OK. We are going to get the Secret Service protection in a few days. They assign it four months before the elections. I figured I’d drive down here while I still can without supervision.”

“Life in politics must be hard.”

“Yes, it is!” a halting voice came up behind.

Jennifer turned and barely contained her gasp. Sam Baker had aged noticeably, even in just the couple of months she had not seen him. A quick succession of his wife’s death and retirement from politics had left an imprint. The once stocky, powerfully built man became frail, shuffling his feet and leaning on a cane.

Sam kissed his granddaughter and sat down.

“Who would have thought—me getting out of politics just as my granddaughter was getting into it. Pour me some of that ice tea, sweetheart.”

Nana poured him a glass and he noisily kissed her on the cheek as well.

“Yes, it’s not easy to be a wife of a politician. Your grandmother used to say that she was living in a glass bowl, with everyone looking in.”

“The attention has been difficult,” Jennifer admitted.

“Fortunately, we live on a small dead-end street and the city agreed, with the neighbors’ permission, to block it for most traffic. But it’s been harder on Jeff than on me. He is a very private, shy person and all the attention and notoriety are not easy.”

“Your husband is the most apolitical politician I have ever met,” Sam added.

“He never wanted to get into politics. It’s just one thing led to another, and for all his shyness he is not the one to step away from a challenge. And the next challenge, and the next. He is stubborn.” Jennifer smiled proudly.

“Grandpa, why won’t you help my dad?” asked Nana.

“Nana!” exclaimed Karen and Jennifer in unison. Poor girl recoiled.

“That’s OK, sweetheart. Don’t let them shut you down. Asking tough questions is your constitutional right.” Sam laughed and patted

Nana's hand. "Why, indeed? You see, I walked out of politics two years ago and promised myself I'd never get involved again."

"Why?"

"I'd been in Washington for almost forty years. I will admit that sometimes the power went to my head; there are some things I did that I am not proud of. But, for the most part, I tried to do what I thought was the right thing. Von Bismarck once said that 'Politics is the art of the possible,' and that's true. We were doing what was possible, hoping that the future would bail us out. We knew that piling on trillions and trillions of debt and obligations was wrong, but we'd been told this was the only way to save the country. And to get re-elected. And that we just 'owed it to ourselves,' so it didn't matter. We thought that we'd be able to control everything, but we were wrong. I lost faith in knowing what the right thing is. That's why I don't want to get involved."

The old man sat back in his chair and looked into the distance, over the ocean.

Everyone was quiet for a minute, and then Jennifer asked, "Nana, do you need any help with the online math course?"

"Yes, Mom, if you can take a look at the last two lessons. I really want to catch up before the next school year starts."

Jennifer and Nana excused themselves and went into the house.

"Who does Nana look like?" asked Caroline. "She has some of Jennifer in her. Not much of Jeff, judging by the pictures."

"She looks just like Pavel," replied Karen. "Same eyes, same nose, same hair. His genes skipped a generation."

"Your ex-husband?"

"My late husband," Karen corrected her. "Pavel was killed before we got divorced."

"The police concluded it was a suicide," said Sam Baker.

"Dad, Pavel was killed. Let's not debate this again."

"Yes, of course," her father conceded.

Karen turned to Caroline. "You see, Jennifer still blames me and my dad for her father's death. She thinks that if we had not split up,

Pavel would not have gotten involved in whatever got him killed. She's been cold to me ever since, for eighteen years."

"Who killed him?"

"We don't know. Just before his death, he made two trips to Russia, investigating some financial machinations. He also met with Jeff Kron, my son-in-law. Jeff was accused of murder at that time. He believes that Pavel was the one who set him free."

"Yes, I've heard that story." Caroline nodded. "And that changed Jeff's life and Jennifer's life, and now Jeff is running for President. Can you believe that?" Caroline turned to Sam.

"When you get to be eighty-five, not much surprises you." Sam smiled. "You change someone's life and you just might change the world."

"Sam, do you think Pavel helped to free Jeff?"

Sam sipped his ice tea, thought for a minute.

"Perhaps, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that Jeff is absolutely convinced of this. He told me once that he believes that his life was given back to him and thus is no longer just his. Jeff has lived for the past eighteen years to prove that he deserved that second chance at life. That's why he does not shy away from challenges."

"Dad, do you think he'll win the election?" asked Karen.

"I don't know. He is a most unusual politician. Jeff is more of a zealot with a mission to right some of the wrongs that the powerful people of this world inflicted on the less fortunate ones. I would have been scared of him except that I know he does not believe in the end justifying the means. And I think that Jennifer provides a good, stabilizing influence on him. She doesn't scare some people off the way Jeff does. In a sense, she is a better politician."

Caroline laughed. "Amen to that, I would vote for her!"

*Washington, DC, USA*

By 2024, the Federal Bureau of Investigations operated on a \$12 billion annual budget. For that money, it had almost fifteen thousand field agents and four thousand analysts. But the largest group of the FBI workforce was professional staff, a significant portion of which was dedicated to building and managing the data gathering and analysis infrastructure. The central hub was the vast classified data center in Virginia, to which high-speed communications networks carried hundreds of petabytes of data daily, to be simply stored or sifted through by powerful supercomputers.

The FBI data infrastructure interconnected with a similar infrastructure of the National Security Agency (NSA), forming a redundant, highly reliable web that tracked video feeds, phone exchanges, e-mails, captured verbal conversations, and more. Anything that was not encrypted was analyzed in almost-real time against target words, expressions, and data sequences.

Encrypted data was forwarded to the 'Alan' section, named after Alan Turing. Alan's computers decoded effortlessly most of the standard encryption schemes. Only a small percentage of the encrypted data that used specialized algorithms with very long, sometimes one-time codes could not be broken easily. These messages were sent to a designated 'brute force' section of supercomputers that were churning through quadrillions of combinations daily trying to decipher the code. It was a constant battle between the ever-powerful data center and a few privacy-obsessed malcontents that stubbornly continued to come up with new algorithms and longer codes.

The data center had an electronic dossier on every adult American. Each dossier compiled many gigabytes of data including their addresses, education, work experiences, iris prints, encoded facial recognition profile, organizations they belonged to, tax records, history of internet searches and site visits, their virtual world encounters, captured video, audio, e-mail, and texting records, their purchases, their travel, instances of their license plates being caught by drones and ubiquitous cameras, and more. Even if the correlated

data did not trigger any pre-programmed alarms, it was sitting there for later use and a more detailed analysis—if needed.

The FBI mined the data to prevent terrorist attacks. A great many attacks had been successfully prevented and lives saved. A significant number of people that had not planned any attacks had been harassed, intimidated, sometimes even convicted on unrelated charges because they had exhibited a “disobedient and hostile” behavior pattern. The IRS mined the data to catch tax avoiders. Very large amounts of money had been recovered. A few of the targets had been driven into poverty, sometimes suicide, over minor violations. Organized crime mined the data for blackmail purposes—one of the FBI computer engineers got himself in trouble with an underage girl and agreed to secretly download and provide the collected files to them. The blackmail business was booming.

Despite the substantial budget, the FBI was struggling to contain ballooning costs. Especially in the Information and Technology Branch where the shortage of qualified people and competition with the private sector combined to keep expenses high. A year ago, a solution was found—to bring in contractors from FreedomShield, Inc. Some protesting voices had been raised, questioning how come an external company could provide such services cheaper and, generally, the wisdom of using contractors in such a sensitive position. But FreedomShield had a stellar reputation, was a local Virginia company, their employees had Top Secret clearances and passed extensive background checks. And FreedomShield had many friends in Washington. They received the contract, the government saved money, everyone was happy.

When FBI Director Miller instructed his trusted lieutenant, Rob Pulson, to quietly initiate comprehensive surveillance of John Dimon and Jeff Kron, Pulson bypassed the head of the Information and Technology Branch and relayed this request to his protégé Mouli Chakrapani, the man in charge of special electronic surveillance projects. Chakrapani was loyal to Pulson. He had the surveillance set up and started passing the daily reports up the chain.

The man who actually programmed the surveillance, like most people in the Information and Technology Branch, was a contractor working for FreedomShield. Unbeknown to Chakrapani, the gathered data started going in parallel to another data center about a hundred miles away. It joined a large feed already flowing in the same direction. Normally, the data center's security systems would have raised an alarm. But the person managing the network security alerts was another FreedomShield employee with the *super user* privileges and she exempted this particular connection as "allowed."

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jeff was on the living room couch nursing a scotch when Jennifer returned.

“How was your day? How come you’re sitting in the dark?” She pecked him on the cheek.

“Letting my eyes rest a bit. Long day with Robert, plus we did four virtual town halls.”

“Well, these town halls are really working. We’ve been averaging seven thousand logins for each one in the past two weeks.” Jennifer stumbled around in the semi-darkness and poured herself a drink.

“At this rate, by the election time we’ll reach three million more people, about one percent of the population.” Jeff shrugged.

“Or about two percent of prospective voters.” Jennifer positioned herself in a recliner opposite of her husband. “And our research shows that each attendee potentially influences four others. Now we are looking at ten percent of prospective voters being influenced. That’s where elections are won and lost.”

“Oh, Jen, your glass is always half full.” Jeff smiled.

“Figuratively and literally.” She smiled back, lifting her glass. “My goodness, you are doing so great! If someone told you a year ago that you’d have a realistic chance of winning the presidential elections, would you have believed that person?”

“No, I would have told him to have his head examined. And you know, it’s all thanks to you. I just wouldn’t have had the wherewithal on my own.”

“Honey, you wrote the books, you gave the speeches, you fought for the California initiatives, you went on a hunger strike...”

“Jen, you went on that strike with me. You took charge of the social media outreach. You know that’s how everything started and took off like a brushfire.”

“All right, we did it. Together. But, honey, after seventeen years I know a few things about you. Something’s bugging you. What is it?”

“You know me too well.” Jeff laughed. He bit his lip, chewed on it. “People ask me why I’m running and I give them my stock answer, the one we practiced with Robert for days. But I keep asking myself,

why do I run, really? What is driving me? I never planned to run. I just put one foot in front of the other and the stakes kept going up and up and now they can't go any higher."

"So, why do you run, honey?" She used a term of endearment but her tone was dead serious.

"You see, Jen, it's like peeling the layers of an onion. Every time you think you have the answer, there is something underneath. I had to go back to what put me on this warpath back in 2006, when I was released."

Jennifer sipped her drink, not certain she wanted to hear the answer.

"What was it, Jeff?"

"Revenge. It was revenge. Not for me, for my father. You know, back in 2003, when I went to John Brockton's house, I had a gun in my pocket."

"I know. You've never used it."

"No, I haven't. I always maintained that I brought it to scare Brockton, that I just wanted to confront him."

"And?"

"It was a lie. I wanted to kill him. Yes, I wanted to kill that man. For driving my father to suicide. For—I am sure—driving others into despair or worse."

Jennifer leaned forward, put her hand on her chest to keep her heart from jumping out. "But, Jeff, you didn't kill him!"

"No. He was dead by the time I got there. But in my mind, in my heart, I did. I am innocent in the eyes of the law, but I am not innocent before God."

He paused, but Jennifer remained silent.

"So I'd set out with revenge on my mind. And I could no longer take revenge on John Brockton. But what I came to realize was that there were many John Brocktons. People that took advantage of the system. People that manipulated it to take advantage of others. And the system had become so infested that you couldn't distinguish them from the system anymore."

"They are the system," said Jennifer flatly.

"Yes, they are the system. It's not even greed but predatory use of others. Society can't survive under an absolute individualism."

“Honey, you need something strong to feed your fire to survive this. If revenge is the fire, so be it.”

“Thank you, love. But what I am trying to understand is whether this passion of revenge has turned me into Don Quixote, charging the windmills instead of real dragons.”

“What do you mean?”

“I keep trying to explain myself to people, but I feel like I am failing. I don’t know if people want this change I am calling for or if they like the system as it is. Do you remember how some years ago we were discussing George Orwell’s *1984* vs. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*?”

“Yes, I remember that discussion,” Jennifer said. “The grand debate: will the Big Brother be watching you or will you be watching the Big Brother?”

“Well, we know the answer now. We may have the *1984*-style surveillance, but overall, Huxley was right—we are being entertained into submission to the system. Remember the old movie *Matrix*, where the hero was offered the red pill for the painful truth of reality or the blue pill for the blissful ignorance of illusion? I think we have collectively taken the blue pill: we are glued to our immersion TV experiences and we don’t care to look for a wizard behind the curtain. And that’s why it’s so difficult to get traction: people don’t want to hear, they don’t want to know. They want to get home, turn on their 3-D immersion TV and forget reality. They don’t care who rules them.”

Jennifer put down her glass, got up and moved to the couch next to her husband.

“Hon, I know it’s hard to get people to pay attention. So many turned inwards, disengaged from the larger society, stopped voting. Hard to blame them when we cart off to jail someone stealing a slice of pizza but people that engineer financial disasters get away free. But more and more are taking interest. You now have at least a quarter of the country behind you. We’ve always spoken about building a coalition; you’re doing it. Many aren’t tuning out; they want real change. They come from different walks of life. They believe in you. You have to keep fighting, for them and for your father. If it’s the revenge that feeds your fire, so be it!”

Jeff put his arm around his wife.

“OK, sweetheart. I have to be reminded from time to time. We’ll keep going!”

**JULY 2024**

*Upstate New York, USA*

A woman was kneeling by the gravestone lost in her thoughts when Jeff and Jennifer approached.

“Sarah,” Jennifer called out gently.

The woman turned around, smile spreading.

“Jennifer. Jeff.”

She got up, brushed the dirt off her knees and hugged the couple. Sarah looked to be well into her fifties, but her figure was that of a much younger woman, with only lines on the face and lots of white in her black hair, betraying the real age.

“Your mother couldn’t come?” Sarah asked Jennifer.

“No. Grandpa isn’t well and it’s not an easy trip for her these days.”

“Of course. Flying all the way across the country... I’m surprised you made it.” Sarah looked at Jeff. “You must be very busy with the elections.”

Jeff shook his head. “This is important to me. If not for Pavel, I wouldn’t have been here. I would have been waiting to be released from jail right about now. And we have a TV interview in New York soon, so it all fit.”

“Pavel would have been so proud of you.” Sarah turned to the grave and started to cry. “You know, in his father’s diary, the one I gave to Jennifer, there was one folded page with Pavel’s handwriting. It said *‘One who saves a life, saves an entire world.’*”

Sarah crumbled to her knees, sobbing.

“I saw it,” Jennifer whispered. “He changed so many lives: Jeff’s, mine, my mother’s, yours...”

Sarah turned violently and, still on her knees, grabbed Jeff’s hand.

“There must be a reason! God, fate, destiny, karma... Call me a crazy woman, but I don’t believe it’s all random, just a bunch of unconnected accidents. Whatever we do begets something else and carries on. They took Pavel away from me so you could have a chance at greatness.”

Jeff lowered himself to the ground, hugged Sarah.

“No, no... I never planned any of this, just one thing led to another.”

“Of course you didn’t plan. But you lived your life as something to be earned, to make a difference.”

“He gave me a gift,” Jeff said, “a gift I can never fully repay, only strive towards. If not for him, Jeff Kron the presidential candidate would have never happened.”

“Yes. One starts a chain of events, pays it forward. We never know where it’s going to lead, which small act will change everything.”

*Los Angeles, CA*

“Last year I held a neighborhood Fourth of July barbeque; probably two hundred people showed up. So we had to spread a rumor that I’m out of town.” Alejandro laughed. “That’s why we’re sitting here with the blinds closed.”

“I’m sorry,” said Maggie. “Didn’t mean to ruin the neighborhood party.”

“Oh, I kind of enjoy the peace and quiet; last year was a bit over-the-top. Plus these takeout baby back ribs are much better than anything I ever managed to grill.” Alejandro’s pupils seemed to dilate when he looked at Maggie.

Then he grew serious.

“Look, it’s been four days since you spoke with Jim Brobak.”

“I know,” said David glumly. “I think we’ll just have to take our chances and go to Jennifer Kron with what we’ve got.”

“That’s not the point I’m trying to make.” Alejandro glanced aside and then looked David directly in the eye. “You told Brobak that you are back in the country.”

“So?”

“From what I figure, a few months after helping you Brobak ends up in a lower position in a smaller city. Do you think it’s a coincidence? Brobak himself told you that he lost his job and his family because of that. So maybe, just maybe, Brobak would want to gain some favors and perhaps get back his old position in the FBI by informing on you?”

“John Platt was his friend!” exclaimed David. Upon seeing the grim expressions of others in the room, he covered his face. “Oh my god, I should have never told him I came back.”

“But Brobak doesn’t know where in the country we are,” said Maggie hopefully.

“Los Angeles is the first place they’ll look,” Alejandro said harshly. “I can move Maggie and Oleg, but David will have to leave.”

“Where?”

“Probably back to Mexico.”

“It’s been only four days. Let’s give it more time,” protested David.

Oleg shook his head. “We are jeopardizing Alejandro. We must go.”

“Can we give it just a couple more days? You probably need this time to prepare anyway,” Maggie pleaded, looking straight at Alejandro. “Then we’ll decide.”

He slowly nodded his head.

“Yes, of course.”

David still sat with his face in his hands, murmuring, “Why did I tell him I came back? Why?”

Alejandro raised his eyebrows and stared at David, his face hard and unreadable.

*Moscow, Russia*

Three people were finishing dinner in a richly adorned room, colored in amber hue from the setting sun.

“I enjoy visiting the Kremlin on summer evenings,” commented one of the diners. “St. Basil’s Cathedral rising like a flame... such a beautiful sight.”

“Thank you, Ambassador,” replied a pale-eyed man. “I love the view as well.”

The man he referred to as “Ambassador” carefully touched his lips with a napkin.

“President Mosin, thank you for a delicious dinner. If you don’t mind, I would like to raise a few questions... affairs of the state, you know.”

“Of course, Ambassador Sheng. I did not expect that you asked to meet with me and Foreign Minister Karpov just for the view.”

Ambassador Sheng laughed politely.

“Yes, as much as one would like to just enjoy the dinner, we are all prisoners of our responsibilities. Mr. President, our government would like to know if, in an emergency, it would be possible to increase the flow on the four Trans-Siberian pipelines to their full capacity.”

Mosin rubbed his chin and looked at the third man in the room.

“Volodya, what do you think? You started as a petro-chemical engineer, after all.”

“Well, I have not practiced my engineering training in many years,” Vladimir Karpov carefully replied. “Theoretically, it’s possible. These pipelines have been designed to handle at least twice the rated load. But where would we get the oil and gas to do this? We are still sending forty percent of our production to Europe and we’ll have to basically shut that down in order to direct the full capacity flow to China.”

“Yes, this would seem to be a problem, Ambassador.” Mosin turned to Sheng. “May I enquire why are you asking?”

“As I said, Mr. President, this is just an emergency-type question. For example, let’s say the Strait of Malacca gets cut off due to a pirate

action. Almost half of our oil comes through there. We will need to have an alternate supplier.”

“Mr. Ambassador.” Karpov opened his hands in wonderment. “You have a strategic oil reserve that’s officially equivalent to fifty days of consumption. Unofficially, we know it’s at least twice that. You can easily compensate for the loss of Malacca Strait for three to four months. What kind of a pirate would be able to keep it closed that long?”

“One never knows what eventuality may arise.” A hint of irritation surfaced in Sheng’s voice. “My government would like to know that in case of a prolonged closure of the strait you will be able to provide us with extra supplies.”

“But, Mr. Ambassador, we have contractual obligations to European governments,” protested Mosin. “We can’t just cut them off. They need our supplies. Imagine what would happen if it were winter and their people were not getting gas to heat their homes. Thousands would die.”

“Mr. President, we essentially paid for these Trans-Siberian pipelines and we take more than half of your country’s oil and gas production. If we were to start looking elsewhere, that would have a profound negative effect on your economy.”

“Are you threatening us?” Mosin’s tone brought the room’s temperature down a few degrees.

“No, not at all, Mr. President. Just pointing out that we’ve spent at least twenty years building a mutually beneficial alliance between our countries and we hope that you’ll remain our friends in a time of need.”

“Of course, Mr. Ambassador. We greatly appreciate friendship with your country. Was that the only topic you wanted to discuss?” Mosin’s voice remained chilly.

“There was one more point, Mr. President,” replied Sheng. He waited to be prodded, then offered, “The last time we met, we spoke about holding joint exercises in the Pacific. Our government thinks that the current exercises are going exceedingly well and would like to discuss increased global coordination of peaceful military activities.”

“And why is that, Mr. Ambassador?”

“Mr. President, over the past two years there has been increasingly loud rhetoric from the American side about ‘payback’ for the 2019 crisis. And now the loudest voice there is leading the presidential race. We have to be jointly prepared for the worst.”

“We are still four months from the American elections; John Dimon is not guaranteed to win. Even if he does, this is probably just electoral rhetoric.”

“Mr. President, my government thinks it’s prudent to prepare for all eventualities starting now.”

“If I knew that you were going to bring up this question, I would have invited Shelkov, our new Minister of Defense. We are not qualified to discuss this question in any practical detail here.”

“I understand. I would like to ask that we arrange another meeting then, and soon.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ambassador,” replied Mosin dismissively.

“Can you believe this son of a bitch?” Mosin slammed his hand on the table after Sheng left.

“We are a junior partner in this alliance. He reminded us of that today,” Karpov commented sadly.

“Yes, reminded us that we are their bitches. Volodya, have we made a mistake getting into bed with them? Ten years ago we wanted to keep them at arm’s length.”

“Borya, we did not have much of a choice then. The Americans kept pushing us from the West, bringing the NATO bases closer and closer to our borders. Then the Ukrainian situation blew up and the Americans tried to bankrupt us like in the 1980s, by crashing the price of oil and the ruble. You wouldn’t have survived if not for China’s support.”

“Yes, we needed their help, we needed new markets for our oil and gas, and we needed investments. And we had to attack the U.S. dollar’s hegemony; otherwise we did not stand a chance in the economic warfare being waged,” Mosin said. “So now we find ourselves in this mess. You know, Volodya, our wealth of natural resources might have been more of a curse than a blessing. After years of trying to build up our manufacturing and knowledge-based economy, despite having a great education system and some of the

best engineers in the world, half of our exports are still energy. For all our posturing, we are a poor country. Why is that? Where are we failing?”

“Borya, we are still corrupt as hell. A bunch of well-connected oligarchs run everything. We’ve been together long enough, I’ll just say it as I see it: let’s face the truth, many of them are your cronies that are robbing this country.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Mosin closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his left hand. “I need them in order to stay in power. I thought I could move to a new leadership over time, but there was always that challenge to stay in power, always one step away from slipping. How do you move a giant bureaucracy? People think that presidents have this magic wand. All right, enough about that; let’s talk about the Chinese and the Americans.”

“I think the Chinese are in a bit of a pickle,” Karpov said. “They may have miscalculated back in 2019. The stronger renminbi brought down their costs of external resources but made them less competitive internationally and their internal market could not quite pick up the slack. The manufacturing automation revolution hit them hard. They are facing stubbornly high unemployment. Their corruption exceeds even ours. The shadow banking system they evolved a dozen years ago remains a big problem—it was helped for a while by the foreign inflows thanks to a strong currency, but without reform it keeps misallocating capital. And the pro-democracy movement keeps growing. Back in 1989, they crushed the Tiananmen protests with tanks without any real consequences. They thought they could get away with it in 2022 ...”

“Damn butchers!” interrupted Mosin. “They literally ran tanks over the protesters!”

“Yes, this time the massacre was caught on camera, was on the internet in a few minutes, and is still reverberating. People are less afraid of speaking out; they feel that there is safety in numbers. Not a week goes by without massive protests in one of the cities.”

“So they might be looking for a way to deflect this anger outwards, right?” asked Mosin.

“Yes. This whole thing that Sheng spun about the Malacca Strait pirates is nonsense. The only way that the strait gets closed for any meaningful period of time is a war with India or the US.”

“Do you think it can be India?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Karpov waved him off. “The Chinese have tensions with the Indians, but their main problems and objectives lie to the east, with Taiwan and Japan. The US is standing in the way.”

“And what about the Americans?”

“The internal situation there is complicated. They recovered from some of the blows suffered in 2019; their manufacturing is growing again, although not providing employment—robots are replacing people. The post-crisis strife did not break the country apart but became directed against the status quo. The country remains divided. However, the main fault line now is between the small minority that has the wealth and the political power, and the majority that is poor and powerless. The diminished middle class is caught in-between.”

“Kind of like us,” Mosin said with a note of sadness.

“Yes, kind of like us. We could not rise to their level, so they came down to ours,” Karpov agreed and continued. “The mainstream parties’ candidates are trailing in the polls, with two unexpected and very different frontrunners: John Dimon and Jeff Kron. We are still trying to figure out Jeff Kron; he is a strange, almost reluctant candidate, being pushed to the front by people looking for alternatives, perhaps as a protest vote. But he seems to be a peacenick. I don’t see why the Chinese would worry about him.”

“Have you seen John Dimon’s latest speech, the one he made today in Gettysburg?”

“No, I am afraid not,” admitted Karpov.

“I was watching it right before Sheng showed up.” Mosin made a hand movement in the direction of a hidden projector and a menu of videos appeared. Mosin pointed at the one with Dimon’s name and an image came up on the projection screen.

It was staged on a green lawn with trees, a white obelisk, and rows of small memorial stones in the background. A photogenic,

clean-cut man in his early forties, dressed formally, was speaking and gesticulating from a makeshift podium.

*For years now, we've been under attack from abroad. They have succeeded in inflicting pain, but they have not defeated us. With the current administration, they mistake our patience and good will for weakness and cowardice. Well, let there be no mistake: when I represent you in the White House, they will not make such mistakes anymore!*

The crowd roared and applauded in approval. Dimon waited until the applause subsided and continued.

*We will not suffer such humiliations any longer! We will not tolerate more financial attacks like the one they cowardly unleashed on us in 2019, nor will we accept more unfair economic practices! We will not let them steal American jobs!*

He paused and the crowd roared again.

*Thousands of brave soldiers died here in order to protect this great nation. On this sacred ground, I promise you that I will bring forward fair proposals that will be designed to relieve this intolerable position. They will be peaceful proposals. But let there be no mistake: the whole might of this nation and its armed forces will stand behind them!*

Dimon threw his arms in the air and the crowd went wild.

*I have faith in our nation. I have faith in our people. We shall prevail!*

Mosin waved his hand and the screen disappeared.

“Well, Volodya, what do you think?”

“He puts on a good spectacle,” Karpov mused. “I still tend to think that he is an opportunist seizing on a populist message to get the votes and once he gets into the office—if he gets into the office—he’ll become much more reasonable. But I can see why the Chinese would be worried. Dimon is a demagogue and a masterful orator. He could be dangerous.”

“Are they worried or using this as an internal pretext?” Mosin thought out loud. “He might be the excuse they need to justify a pre-emptive strike. The world is getting as unsafe as I remember, and I’ve been around for a while.”

Mosin got up.

“Look, Volodya, I don’t like the Americans. They’ve been the number one enemy as long as I’ve been in power. We’ve been waging economic warfare, we fought small proxy wars. But a direct conflict

between the great powers, that's an entirely different ballgame. The reality is, we can't be a global power on our own. I'd rather play a regional role than risk a major confrontation. We can't prevent others from doing crazy things, but let's not encourage them. This "global coordination of peaceful military activities" that Sheng brought up sounds like a potential multiple front war to me. I don't want any of these activities and I want this new Defense Minister Shelkov to compile a military report on how the Chinese may view a war with the US unfolding."

*Los Angeles, USA*

They were walking in tall grass on a mountain ridge. There was no beaten path; their jeans were getting wet from the morning dew. Fir trees lined the crest on the left while wild flowers covered a sharp drop on the right. David was holding her hand, gently squeezing it from time to time, three squeezes in a row. It was their silent “I love you” talk.

Suddenly, there was a sharp hiss coming from the left. David let go of her hand and turned toward it. A giant black snake rose above the grass. She swayed silently, tiny eyes focused on David, mouth slightly open. David spread his arms as if to defend Maggie and the snake struck with frightening speed. David fell. Maggie rushed to him, but the snake now turned to her. Maggie took a few steps back. The snake followed, hissing, rose again, mouth open. Maggie took another step back and fell. She did not tumble down the hill but fell into nothingness, straight down.

“Maggie! Maggie!” David shook her awake. “You were screaming. What happened?”

“Nothing. Just a bad dream.”

But she knew what happened. Today was two days since Alejandro said that David would have to leave. She’d watched Alejandro looking at David that day, and cold fear gripped her insides.

David turned away and pretended to go back to sleep. She gazed into the milky semi-darkness flowing from the opaque window.

After they got up, David went downstairs and had Cumba make him a cup of coffee. He was sipping the hot liquid when Oleg came into the kitchen.

“Anything from Brobak?”

“No.”

Oleg started making breakfast; he didn’t trust the robot. David went back to the room. He found Maggie in front of the bathroom’s dresser, staring into the mirror, hands in her lap.

“Mag, do you want coffee? Breakfast?”

She shook her head, lips pursed together. He stood behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Should I ask Alejandro to take us for a drive? I’m going stir crazy.”

Maggie didn’t answer, just kept staring in the mirror with narrowed, angry eyes. They stayed like this for a few minutes, then Maggie said, “OK, I have to go now.”

David lifted his hands and took a step back. Maggie stood up. The mirror reflected a pretty woman in a green shirt with two top buttons opened and a short black skirt.

“Where ...” David started and stopped.

Maggie walked out without looking back.

Maggie found Alejandro in the office, going over some numbers on the projection screen.

“Alejandro, I’ve been cooped up here long enough. I want to go for a drive.”

“Fine, get Oleg and David and I’ll call the driver,” he said, without taking his eyes off the screen.

“No, just you and me.”

Alejandro stopped what he was doing, stared straight ahead for a minute, then looked at her appraisingly, from her serious face down to her low-heeled shoes.

“OK. Please put on the wide-brimmed hat and the sunglasses you used on previous excursions.”

After she left, David remained in front of the dresser. Something was out of place, something that his eyes observed but his brain didn’t process. Then it came to him. *The promise ring*. She always wore it on the chain around her neck. Her blouse was open, the ring not there. David opened the right drawer, then the left one. He saw the chain first, a delicate silver chain they’d bought in Bucerias. David lifted the chain, let the ring swing in front of him. An old song came to mind, about making promises but keeping only the easiest.

David went back to the bedroom, got out his traveling suitcase and began to pack.

Alejandro took a regular, not self-driving car.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked while pulling out of the garage.

“Balboa Park.”

Alejandro did a double take.

“That place? From the April of two years ago?”

“Yes, that place.”

They drove in silence, in awe of what took place that April day and apprehensive of what may happen today. Alejandro navigated the car west on Santa Monica Freeway, north on San Diego Freeway, west on Victory Blvd, finally pulling into a distant parking lot. A few cars were there already.

Still wordless, they walked to a large tree. The table and two benches there were occupied by a picnicking family that looked at them without interest.

“That’s where the kidnappers took me to meet David,” stated Maggie.

“Yes, that’s the spot,” Alejandro confirmed.

“They were going to kill us when David and I started walking away.” Alejandro remained silent so she continued. “And you and Oleg killed them.”

“We shot three of them, two others ran away,” Alejandro corrected her.

“Show me where you were hiding.”

Alejandro took her hand and led her up the wooded hill. They walked for about four hundred yards when Alejandro stopped, looked around, circled back about a hundred feet and crouched in a secluded spot.

“Yes, Oleg and I were here. Look, you can see the bench without obstructions.”

“Do I have to keep my hat on?”

“No, we are under tree cover.”

Maggie took off her hat, crouched next to him. The small figures of the picnicking family were in clear view. She heard Alejandro moving. His hands grabbed her waist, cautious at first, then demanding as they moved up to her breasts. He whispered in her ear,

his beard tickling her neck, “I wanted you when I first saw you two years ago through my rifle scope.”

“Is that why your family in Mexico was protecting us? Because you insisted?”

“Yes,” he said, his chest heaving against her back, breaths ragged, hands opening her blouse, unlocking the clip of her bra, fondling her breasts. Then he forcefully turned her, pushing her down on the ground. His face was red, his hands now rushing to pull up the skirt, he removed her panties.

Alejandro stopped and waited for Maggie, but she remained motionless, arms at her sides. He unzipped himself and entered her, the sun directly behind him, his silhouette etched against the blue of the sky, the green of the trees, the gold of the sun. Alejandro’s pace was slow at first, then quickened. He grabbed her buttocks, raising her against his thrusts, and she involuntarily responded with quick breaths, her lips opening, her hands gripping his back, pushing him in, deeper, deeper. Alejandro half-moaned, half-exhaled and she cried out as he came inside of her.

Alejandro collapsed on top of Maggie, breathing heavily. His weight felt good; he was still inside of her. As his breath returned to normal, he rolled on his back next to her. They both looked up at the sun, the sky, the trees.

“Leave him. He is weak; he can’t protect you. I will.”

Maggie raised herself on one elbow, turning to Alejandro.

“Alejandro, you can have me as long as we are in your house. But leave him alone. You can’t talk to him about this.”

He looked at her for a long while, then comprehension crept in and anger distorted his handsome face. Alejandro sat up sharply and pushed her down, his hand on her breast, but now it was there to keep Maggie on the ground.

“Is that why you did this? So I continue taking care of you? That’s all it is?”

Maggie put her hand into his chest, her lower lip quivering.

“No, Alejandro, that’s not all. You are beautiful; I dreamt of you in my sleep. I wanted you. But I can never leave or hurt him.”

She could not say David’s name out loud.

Alejandro's face softened, his fingers on her breast started a gentle caressing dance.

"But why?"

"Alejandro, do you know why I brought you here, to this spot?"

"Because I saved you here two years ago?"

"Yes, you did. And so did he."

"But he couldn't defend you! You both would have died here if not for Oleg and me. And if not here, Petr would have killed you if we hadn't gotten there in time."

"It's all true, Alejandro. You have saved my life many times." Maggie pulled Alejandro's head down and kissed him hard. "If not for him, I would have gone with you anywhere you ask."

"But why, why?" Alejandro loomed over her, eyebrows raised in puzzlement.

"Alejandro, you were here with a rifle. He was down there, on the bench, empty-handed, facing people with guns."

"So? I don't understand."

"My brave boy, you were ready to kill for me. You still are. He came ready to die for me. No, I can never leave him. If he goes, so will I."

"Maggie, you need someone stronger than him." Alejandro's voice was softer now.

"That's what I thought too," Maggie said, "but Fate gave me him. You will have other women, Alejandro. He will only have me. I know that. Please, don't be angry. Enjoy me."

Alejandro sat next to her, arms folded across his chest, lips pressed together. She studied him out of the corner of her eye. Alejandro did not seem angry. Perhaps he accepted the situation or perhaps he decided to bide his time. Either way, she and David were probably safe for now.

When they returned, Oleg and David were in the kitchen, drinking coffee and watching Cumba putter around.

Maggie went up into the bedroom without saying anything. She saw David's suitcase in the corner, opened it.

When David came up, Maggie was sitting on the bed. She'd changed into a white T-shirt and jeans. The promise ring gently

rested on her chest. David's suitcase was on the bed, open and empty. David slowly kneeled in front of Maggie. She put her arms around his neck, closed her eyes and leaned her head against his.

*Farmington, USA*

Jim Brobak flipped an old-fashioned pencil between his middle and index fingers, back-and-forth, back-and-forth. It was the Friday after Independence Day. Most of the country had a day off, taking a break, firing up their barbecues. But the FBI resident agency had to be open. Jim did not really have anyone to celebrate with anyway.

David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin were back in the country. The fugitives, even enemies of the state to some. He had to report this to his superiors. The surveillance apparatus would be focused on finding them; they would not get away this time. He might get transferred back to Dallas, patch things up with Janet.

For five days he'd been agonizing over this. Many times he picked up the secure phone to call his superior officer in Albuquerque—just as many times he put it back. The oath he took said to “defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Were Ferguson and Sappin enemies of the Constitution? Jim had a hard time drawing this conclusion. Twenty years ago in Iraq, it was easy to tell who the enemies were.

“Mr. Brobak? Mr. Brobak?” a voice brought him back. It was Antonio, one of the agents in the office.

“Yes, Antonio?”

“Mr. Brobak, we were wondering if you want to come to lunch with us.”

Jim's first impulse was to decline; he usually ate his lunch alone. But in a sense, this was a small olive branch offering: Jim knew that Antonio had expected to be promoted to be the resident agent-in-charge when the position opened. Instead, the management sent someone from Dallas, someone who did not want to be here. Most of the office was on Antonio's side and Jim felt like an intruder. In fairness, he had not done much to make friends.

“Who's going to stay in the office?”

“Daniel will stay back. Liam and Maria will come with us. We'll be close, in a Mexican restaurant two blocks away.”

After they got seated, Liam, the youngest agent in the office, excitedly asked, "Have you seen John Dimon's speech? Was it awesome or what?"

"Right on!" Antonio pumped his hand. "It was short and strong. I watched it over and over. When he said 'We will not tolerate more financial attacks! We will not let them steal American jobs!' I had goosebumps running down my back."

Liam joined in. "And the setting at Gettysburg, with the monument and memorial stones in the background, it was amazing!"

"Liam, sounds like you like John Dimon; do you?" asked Jim.

"Yes, Mr. Brobak." The young man nodded. "Everybody in the agency loves him. We need a strong man like him, a patriot, someone who will defend our rights."

"Someone who believes in America," Antonio added. "Someone who points the finger at the real culprits abroad."

A call came from Daniel, a request from the local police that stopped a car with suspicious materials.

"Darn, so much for the office lunch," grumbled Antonio. "Liam and I will take ours to go."

After the agents left, Brobak turned to Maria, a quiet office administrator in her late sixties.

"Maria, you didn't say anything. What do you think of John Dimon?"

"Mr. Brobak, I don't get involved in politics," answered Maria carefully, her eyes down. Then added, "Liam and Antonio, they remind me of my son, Carlos."

"How's that?"

"He was young, he wanted to defend freedom, defend his adopted country."

"Was?" Jim asked, unsettled by how Maria said it, all in the past tense.

"He was killed in Fallujah in Iraq, back in November of 2004."

"I am so sorry." Jim exhaled. "I was there. In Iraq, not in Fallujah."

Maria looked at Brobak directly, her eyes full of the pain of twenty years.

“Mr. Brobak, if you were there, tell me: what did my son die for? Iraq is now run by people that are worse than Saddam Hussein was. Why did we think that going to war half a world away was the best possible thing to do? Why was choosing war a sign of patriotism? Why did I lose my only child?”

“I am sorry, Maria. I wish I could tell you.” It was Jim’s turn to lower his eyes. “I followed my orders, defended my fellow soldiers, and did what I was supposed to do.”

“I understand. Carlos was telling me that he was defending his country, protecting his kids’ future. He had two little boys. But I look now and I see my grandsons working two jobs to live from paycheck to paycheck. They told us the sacrifice was justified. Not to me. I needed my son and they needed their father.” Maria began to cry quietly.

“I am so sorry, Maria.” Jim was close to tears himself. “I didn’t know.”

“But that’s how it is, Mr. Brobak.” Maria wiped her tears. “That’s how it’s always been. The old men use these big words to send the young men to die. And I watch this John Dimon and I see another man that wants to send others to die. I know enough history; I know about the battle of Gettysburg; I know the Lincoln’s speech. John Dimon has no right to use the blood of those that died there, to pretend that he is another Abraham Lincoln. But I am an old woman who’s seen it all. The young people, like Liam and Antonio, they listen, they believe.”

Jim sat quiet, his head bowed down.

“Please don’t tell anyone I said this, Mr. Brobak. I need this job so I can help my daughter-in-law and my grandsons. I know you are a good man; you’re trying to defend us. Most of the people in the government are good people and want to do what’s right. But the ones giving the orders, pulling the strings—I don’t trust them anymore. I think they care about their power, not about us little people. So, Mr. Brobak, no, I don’t like John Dimon.”

After they returned to the office, Jim went back to flipping his pencil. Did Ferguson and Sappin try to sell the information? Not as far as he knew. Were those trading on inside information prior to the financial crisis protecting the Constitution? Did people deserve to know?

*Richmond, Virginia, USA*

“I like what you’ve done with your office!” exclaimed Bob Johnson, looking around a bright, sparsely furnished room. A glass wall allowed a panoramic view of the city. The space communicated business, simplicity, elegance: an uncluttered work desk, a side conference table with a speakerphone, a few chairs. Paintings on the wall added a touch of luxury, a seriousness of big money.

“Are these the originals?” Johnson studied a painting of a table with a pitcher and two bowls of fruits.

“Of course! This is Cezanne. On the other wall, Kandinsky,” replied Erik King. “Bob, it’s been a long time since our service in Iraq. This is business. It won’t do for the CEO of FreedomShield to display fakes.”

“Business must be good?”

“It’s very good. Demand for private security is exploding. All these people in big mansions, all the gated communities, they want real, heavily armed protection from people that know how to use their guns. Government organizations are also supplementing their resources with ours. All this money that we pay to politicians and lobbyists comes back a hundred-fold. You need a trained force on demand? We are here and we’ve got it all.”

“I hear we’re expanding internationally?” asked Johnson.

“Carefully. We’re keeping to the Americas. Let other mercenaries dabble in Europe and the Middle East; too easy to lose people or get bad publicity. We’ve been focusing on protection technologies. Do you see anything unusual about this glass?”

Johnson walked over to the full-wall glass, touched it, and looked closely.

“It looks different. Slightly opaque, shimmery...”

“It is different!” King laughed. “It is a special blend of reflective polycrystalline magnesium aluminum oxide with some other magic. I have learned the name because it makes closing sales easier. This glass will stop an air-to-surface missile while also preventing any kind of electronic or sound snooping from the outside. We charge a hell

of a lot to install it as a part of a “FS Protection Plus” package and we have an eight-month waiting list.”

Johnson leaned into the glass, knocked on it. The glass made a dull sound.

“Will it really stop a missile?” he asked incredulously.

“Depends on the size, of course. We have a training site fifteen miles out of town. For the customers willing to place a seven-figure order, we do a little demonstration of firing an actual missile at a glass just like this. They are offered to be in the room on the other side. For whatever reason, everybody refuses.” King chuckled.

The secretary’s melodic Southern drawl filled the room:

“Mr. King? Mr. Smith is on the phone.”

“Thank you, honey.” King turned to Johnson. “He could have been more creative with his pseudonym, but with the money he pays us he can call himself whatever he wants.”

He motioned Johnson to the round conference table, sat down, and punched a button on the speakerphone.

“Mr. Smith?”

“Mr. King?”

“Yes. Bob Johnson is here with me, as you requested.”

“Good. I know it’s redundant to ask, but I will ask anyway: this is a secure communication?” Smith’s pronunciation was precise and clear but unmistakably accented.

“Of course. The line, as you know, is encrypted with extra-long codes that change every four hours. The room we are in is completely electronically shielded, swept for listening devices twice a day, and physical access is strictly controlled.”

“OK, I would expect nothing less. Mr. Johnson, I watched Mr. Dimon’s speech at Gettysburg. I am glad you are keeping him safe.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith,” replied Johnson deferentially.

“Now, it’s not enough to keep him safe. We need for him to win. Mr. Dimon represents a very significant investment for us. And a very promising future for your company, Mr. King.”

“Yes, of course,” King responded. “We very much want Mr. Dimon to win. He is a true American patriot.”

“It’s nice that you want him to win. But we may need more than your desires. That Jeff Kron remains a problem. Even after the

Gettysburg speech, the latest polls have him only four points behind Dimon.”

“What would you like us to do about this?”

“I’ll talk to Dimon separately; I have an idea for neutralizing Kron while guaranteeing Dimon’s win. But for now, run by me your capabilities again.”

“Mr. Smith, we have over a hundred people and sixteen drones dedicated to protecting Mr. Dimon,” Johnson said.

“That’s not what I am talking about.”

King motioned for Johnson to be quiet.

“Mr. Smith, FreedomShield can mobilize thousands if needed. Back in 2022, we helped the government with anti-riot activities. We have a network of loosely affiliated freelancers that helped with dispersing crowds while keeping our—and the government’s—hands clean.”

“Good. So you can help to support pro-Dimon rallies and handicap pro-Kron rallies. What else?”

“We have over a hundred manned aircraft, almost a thousand versatile armored vehicles, hundreds of observation drones. We have a lot of sympathizers in police and security services; some are secretly on our payroll. We are well plugged into their networks. Many of our people and equipment are under contract to government services; our employees manage some of the key data management functions for them. Our employees are not subject to constitutional limitations that apply to government employees. Some people find it convenient.”

“Excellent! I presume you can put Kron under both human and electronic surveillance.”

“Do you want us to do this?”

“Yes. I want to know every step that Kron and his wife take, every conversation they have.”

“Consider it done. Do you want to discuss the costs?”

“No. I trust you to not be unreasonable. You know it’s not in your interests. What else do you have?”

“Well, we have seventeen secret weaponized drones throughout the world.” King shifted uncomfortably. “This is, of course, top secret. We used some for covert government operations in Central

America. They are controlled only by us and can be launched with a twenty-four-hour notice.”

“So I guess the elimination of certain pro-socialist leaders in Honduras and Guatemala was your handiwork. Are they traceable to you?”

“No. They are Chinese, Russian, and French military drones. Equipped with their missiles. Some of the avionics have been replaced to work with our network. They are also programmed to self-destruct.”

“How are they guided?”

“We can use any of the operational satellite navigation systems on demand: American GPS, Russian GLONASS, Chinese Beidou, European Galileo. If you want us to make it look like a Russian operation, we’ll configure it with GLONASS. If you want to make it look like a Chinese operation, we’ll configure it with Beidou. Reconfiguration from the GPS is an extra forty-eight hours.”

“The missile?”

“An equivalent of the previous generation Hellfire IV, hundred pounds, enough to take out a medium-size building.”

“Excellent. You have built some nice capabilities.”

“Err, Mr. Smith,” Erik King stumbled. “We have never used these weaponized drones on the American soil.”

“Well, Mr. King, who said anything about using them? Just good to know what’s available.”

After Mr. Smith hung up, Erik King turned to Johnson.

“We already have comprehensive electronic tracking of Kron courtesy of the U.S. government, the data we get even before the FBI sees it. I tell you, bidding that contract below cost was a brilliant move. I can’t believe I had to fight people on this. We’ll add human surveillance though. I’ll have the Kron surveillance manager report to you daily.”

“Do you think that Mr. Smith is really thinking of us using weaponized drones?”

“Nah, he is just being thorough.” King waved off the question.

“Well, he sounds damn serious about having his boy Dimon win, no matter the cost.”

“We all want Dimon to win. For the sake of the country. And for the sake of our business.”

*Moscow, Russia*

“All right, Minister Shelkov, run us through your view of the potential Sino-American conflict,” requested President Mosin.

“I believe that Beijing will focus on capturing Taiwan,” started Yuriy Shelkov. “It has both economic and political importance for them. Not only will occupying the island increase internal support for the government and bring in a significant developed economy under their control, it will demonstrate to others in the region that America can’t protect them anymore.”

“I presume that by the same token the Americans will fight to protect Taiwan,” commented Foreign Minister Karpov.

“Yes, I believe they will,” agreed Shelkov.

“How do you see the attack unfolding?”

“The Chinese forces are greatly superior to what Taiwan has, so without American help the island won’t hold out for more than a couple of weeks. The problem for Beijing is that the U.S. Seventh Fleet can get there in a matter of days. So I presume that the People’s Liberation Army, PLA, will combine a surprise attack on Taiwan with a simultaneous attack on the Americans’ space-based communication and reconnaissance capabilities. Then they will attempt to deny or at least delay the Seventh Fleet from entering the East China Sea and approaching Taiwan using their numerically superior missile and submarine forces. They will likely try to mine the approaches to Taiwan from the east as well.”

“Will they succeed?” asked Mosin.

“Mr. President, a war is a war; it’s not entirely predictable. We’ve done some computer simulations, and we think their chances of success are fairly high, perhaps as high as seventy percent, but not a sure thing.”

“OK. Let’s say the Chinese attack and succeed.” Mosin turned to Karpov. “What happens then?”

“Well, if the Chinese fail to destroy the Seventh Fleet, the Americans will isolate them, stop any maritime traffic to and from China and just try to outwait Beijing. China has strategic reserves that will hold them for up to four months, but then they will be in deep trouble,” speculated Karpov.

“And if we get involved on the side of China?” asked Mosin.

“If we direct all our energy and other materials to them, Beijing will be able to withstand a much longer blockade, a least a couple of years,” guessed Karpov. “Enough to out-wait the Americans.”

“Also, if our Pacific Fleet will get involved, we believe that China will almost definitely be able to take Taiwan,” added Shelkov.

“Thank you, I now better understand the predicament that Beijing is in.” Mosin nodded. “Minister Shelkov, thank you for your help.”

After Shelkov left, Karpov turned to Mosin.

“So, Boris, what are you going to do? Not long ago you were trying to destroy America.”

“Things have changed, my friend. It’s nice to be needed, to be a potential kingmaker, but I don’t want to forget that we are being placed in a supporting role. We are by far the weakest in this triangle. And once we are no longer needed, well ... it’s best to remain a kingmaker without a king. Besides, wars are terrible and unpredictable. I’d rather hold back. I think that without our commitment Beijing won’t risk going forward with this war.”

*New York, USA*

Jennifer enjoyed her anonymity in Central Park. The next day, she and Jeff had an interview at SBC. It happened to be the same day when the Secret Service protection would start. For whatever reason, on the inside she was dreading this.

She had her own path through the park: in the past few visits, she retraced her father's last visit here as described to her by Sarah. She walked through Central Park Zoo, visited the Ballfields Café, then wandered over to the Great Lawn and spread out on the grass.

Her thoughts kept going back to what Jeff said was motivating him: revenge. He was trying to avenge his father. She did not tell Jeff how well she understood this. Because that was what drove her for the past eighteen years: wishing to avenge her own father's death. She spoke with Sarah. She spoke with a funny old detective Sal Rozen in Santa Barbara. She spoke with Jack Mikulski and Suzy Yamamoto, who helped Pavel Rostin to investigate suspicious financial dealings. She went to St. Petersburg and met with Police Major Vakunin and with a reptilian character named Yevgeny Zorkin, who bought her grandfather's flat. She went to Moscow and met Anya Weinstein and her son David. She was curious about her father's women, trying to comprehend whether there was some of her predestination buried in those tea leaves. She read her grandfather's diary in Russian and in English. She knew that Pavel Rostin had uncovered some kind of conspiracy and paid for it with his life. But she did not have the names. One day, she'd find out. One day, she'd find a way to make them pay. Whoever "they" were.

Jennifer's thoughts turned from her father to her husband. She smiled, remembering. March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007 was another clear, warm spring day in Los Angeles. She'd been studying and having dinner at the Ronald Tutor Campus Center at USC when a shadow had fallen over her table. Jennifer lifted her eyes to see a tall, blond, good-looking stranger looking at her with an uncertain, slightly goofy smile.

She was about to dismiss him as another campus Lothario-wannabe, when the stranger asked, "Excuse me, but are you Pavel Rostin's daughter?"

She dropped her drink, making an awful mess that the stranger tried to help cleaning up. He introduced himself as Jeff Kron and launched into his story that was more incredible than anything she could have imagined. For the previous eight months, she had tried to push her father's death away: the police said it was a suicide. It was too painful to think about it. And this strange man across the table was telling her that her father freed him out of jail, that her father was investigating something dangerous, that this man did not believe for a second that her father killed himself. To this day, she remembered a hot sensation of shame that overcame her that day when she realized that a stranger had more faith in her father's strength than she did.

It was much later, after Nana was born, after many late night discussions, when she understood that Jeff had an overwhelming need to be attached to something much larger than himself. And that she had an equally overwhelming need to know and understand both him and her late father. It was that understanding, intuitive rather than logical, that helped her to accept that Jeff's mission, however he saw it, was always going to be number one in his life. And the only way for her to not be the second fiddle was to share his mission. Which she did, unreservedly and wholeheartedly. Now, she was wondering if it was this common fire of thirst for revenge that united them.

Jennifer got up, shook off leaves and blades of grass that stuck to her jeans. She was worried about Jeff. She saw how the stress of the campaign, the stress of doubt was wearing him down. She had to be strong for him.

*Farmington, USA*

There was still some bourbon left in the bottle, enough for one drink that Jim poured himself. He had not called his superior officer. Whenever he tried, he saw the face of his late friend, John Platt. John had everything—and didn't hesitate to risk it all to find out the truth. Yes, he wanted to get out of this empty rental house. Yes, he wanted Janet and the kids back. But not like this, not at this price. He didn't feel he was serving his oath and defending the Constitution by ratting out two whistleblowers. Because that's what Ferguson and Sappin were—whistleblowers, not traitors. They had uncovered dangerous information and shared it with the world, making some powerful enemies in the process. If John had the courage, if Ferguson and Sappin had the courage, where was his?

Jim finished the drink, reached for the phone, turned it on, and opened the address book to "JohnP" and a Newfoundland number. *Is this how Julius Caesar felt crossing the Rubicon?* Jim pressed the number.

David answered, his voice anxious.

"Jim?"

"Yes. What do you need?"

"Oh, thank God!"

"Why?"

"We weren't sure what you were going to do."

"I wasn't sure myself. So tell me what you need before I change my mind."

"OK, Jim, thank you. To give you some context, we are looking at transactions related to John Dimon."

Jim whistled in astonishment. "The leading presidential candidate?"

"Yes, that John Dimon. His name first came up in a private investment company that did very well in 2019. He seemed to stay in the background, but many people linked to him had their fingers in the cookie jar. I have a list of names and companies. There were many accounts indirectly linked to Dimon."

"So what do you want me to do?"

“I will send you the list. The data on the Schulmann file only goes through early 2020. I want transaction data for these accounts after that. And any correlated data or accounts that come up.”

“OK, I can probably do that.”

“One more thing: many transactions we could not trace because the trail ended up at the SOFI.”

“Whew!” Jim whistled again. “That possibly means that there was some dealing with the Chinese or the Russians.”

“Do you have access to the SOFI?”

“No, of course not. And we don’t really have a cooperative relationship with the Russians that run it. Sorry. Send me your list; tomorrow is a good day for me to do a bit of research. Things are slow on the holiday week.”

*New York, USA*

The National Broadcasting Company, the oldest major U.S. network broadcaster, began as a radio network in 1926, transmitted its first TV broadcast in 1948 and for many years commanded the broadcasting world with two other networks. *The NBC Nightly News* ruled as the number one news program in the country until about ten years ago. The explosion of internet- and social media-centered news sources, such as Robert Treadwell's empire, had overtaken the old and venerable program. But it was still relevant and tried hard to remain so.

Barbara Stanlon, the host of the program, squinted into the mirror as her makeup artist James was applying finishing touches.

"I don't understand why he wouldn't give me an interview by himself, why he has to drag his wife into this," grumbled Barbara.

"But darling, it is rather cute. She is his partner in this journey and he is showing that they are doing it together. I wish I had a partner like this, sharing fame and all," James wistfully said as he focused on a tiny emerging trace of crow's feet on Barbara's face.

"Well, I am concerned that she'll make my job a lot more difficult. From what I've learned, she is combative and very protective of her husband."

"Oh, you've dealt with a lot more difficult people. You'll have no problem handling her." James stood back and singsonged, "Darling, you look ma-a-ahvelous!"

Barbara pursed her lips, then smiled. Yes, at fifty-five she still looked damn good. And she should be able to handle these two amateurs.

"Dear viewers, thank you for tuning in," Barbara Stanlon said, beaming into the camera. "We have a very special show for you today, with Jeff Kron who came seemingly out of nowhere to become one of the leading candidates for the presidency of the United States, and his lovely wife Jennifer."

Barbara turned to her two guests. "You are in tens of millions of homes now. How does it feel?"

Jeff Kron awkwardly grimaced and replied, “Fortunately, I don’t see all of them or I would be even more nervous.”

His health monitor beeped a warning. Jeff was tall and thin, his blondish hair receding and greying. He looked tired and older than his forty-two years, with visible dark circles under his eyes and beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. Jennifer Rostin-Kron, on the other hand, seemed decidedly poised and radiant. She was holding her husband’s hand as if to reassure him.

“I think our viewers will be very interested in hearing how the two of you met.” Barbara smiled. “Jennifer, do you want to tell it from a woman’s point of view?”

“Of course.” Jennifer looked natural, like she’d been interviewed on TV for years. “We met in 2007. I was on my university’s campus when a tall, good-looking stranger approached me and asked if I was Pavel Rostin’s daughter.” She looked up at her husband and smiled.

“Pavel Rostin was your father,” Barbara stated.

“Yes.”

“And you”—Barbara turned to Jeff—“according to what I’ve read, believe that Jennifer’s father saved your life?”

“Yes.” Jeff Kron nodded. “I was serving a life sentence for a murder I did not commit, a murder that had ties to Russia. Pavel, and his father before that, were investigating the case years after it’d been closed. Soon after his involvement, a hired killer in a Russian jail confessed and I was released.”

“But there is no direct evidence that Pavel Rostin was instrumental in your release, is there?” pressed Barbara.

“I don’t believe it was a coincidence,” replied Kron.

“Tragically, Pavel Rostin killed himself before Jeff’s release.” Barbara addressed the camera for a full dramatic effect.

“He did not kill himself?” Jennifer raised her voice.

“What do you mean? There is a police report.”

“Everything that Jennifer and I know about her father tells us he did not commit suicide.” Jeff shook his head. “He came to see me in jail just a few weeks prior to his death. He was a man with a purpose; he was not suicidal. Pavel Rostin was killed, although we don’t know why or by whom. I was not able to thank him for my release.”

“So you went to thank his daughter instead? And fell in love with her?” Barbara looked from Jeff to Jennifer and then at the camera, inviting viewers to share in a romantic story.

Jennifer chuckled. “Actually, it was I who fell in love first. He was so handsome and shy. But I’ve let him think that he’s been the one pursuing me.”

The two women laughed conspiratorially.

“What a lovely story,” Barbara addressed the viewers again. “But let us turn to your political career, Jeff. It began rather unusually, right? You both graduated from college in 2009. Jennifer had a degree in computer science with a minor in public policy; you came out with degrees in economics and history. Jeff, since you had no political background—what prompted you to get involved in politics?”

“I didn’t get involved immediately,” said Jeff. “We struggled to get jobs in a tough market, we had a child...” He hesitated, not sure how to continue.

“May I?” asked Jennifer. “You see, Jeff never wanted to be a politician. We both were affected by the human suffering that we saw in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. For Jeff, it came so soon after the 2000 dot-com crash that ended up destroying his parents. He saw that nothing had changed.”

“*Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown,*” said Jeff.

“What?” Normally unflappable Stanton lifted her eyebrows.

“That’s the last line in one of my favorite old movies, *Chinatown*. To me, it meant that the rich and powerful get away with whatever they want. The people that created the 2008 crisis not only didn’t go to jail, they paid no social costs.”

“I see. You felt it was unfair.”

“Yes.”

“It’s this unfairness that motivated Jeff,” continued Jennifer. “He started writing on matters of economics and history. He started looking for ways to change things.”

“You said in one of your early books that you wanted to change the world.” Barbara Stanlon sounded skeptical. “That’s rather ambitious, isn’t it?”

“The first step in changing the world is believing that you can. And then taking the next step... and the next one...” Jeff shrugged. “I had my life given back to me by someone who cared. I have a debt to pay forward.”

“Do you really think that you can change the world? Isn’t it arrogant to assume such a personal ability?”

“Yes, Barbara, I really think that any person is capable of having an impact. Sometimes an individual action makes only a small immediate difference but will affect something important down the road. And at other times, we can be in a place and at a time where our actions have instant results.”

“So you chose California’s initiatives process as your way of affecting the change?”

“Yes. I think it returns some of the power back to the people.”

“But isn’t that almost a mob rule?”

“There are dangers in direct democracy; we can’t address all the problems by simple majority rule. But there are dangers in a representative democracy as well, especially when money starts playing such a big role in politics. When my representatives are unduly influenced by big money, do they really represent me? I believe we’ve gone too far in the direction of representative democracy, and we need to bring in more direct democracy to have tension between the two and to provide a better check over the people we elect.”

“And that’s how you burst on the political scene in 2016, when the California’s Attorney General tried to block one of your initiatives from gathering votes?”

“Yes.” Jeff Kron smiled. “We wanted to create a constitutional amendment that would have given more control and higher revenue share to local governments. This idea was not welcomed by the established interests.”

“So you and some of your supporters blockaded the government building, got arrested and went on a hunger strike?”

“We did.”

“And that was the beginning of your political career and of the Reform Party?”

“In a way. More people became involved, all volunteers. It was not until 2020 that we originally registered the Reform Party in California.”

“And now it’s in all the states,” pointed out Barbara.

“Thanks to all the volunteers.”

“You are running a somewhat unusual campaign. You have not solicited big-ticket donations, you are using virtual town halls instead of traveling all over the country, you”—Barbara picked up a small tablet—“are distributing digital pamphlets explaining your positions on economy, education, political process. Do you find that people read those? Our collective attention span has been decreasing steadily.”

“Jennifer, how many downloads did we have so far?” Jeff turned to his wife.

“Since we started distributing these pamphlets, we have had over a hundred and twenty million downloads,” Jennifer proudly announced. “For dozens of years now we’ve been feeding voters slogans and soundbytes. We think there is a real desire on the part of many voters to understand the issues rather than be patronized. We want educated voters.”

Barbara Stanlon grimaced skeptically, then caught herself.

“But let’s get to the presidential race. Congratulations—the polls show you in second place in the presidential race, trailing only John Dimon—and not by much. This is an amazing position to be in, given that you have never run for any office before.” Barbara Stanlon paused to give Kron a chance to respond. Seeing that he was waiting for a more direct question, she tossed him one. “What do you attribute this success to, given that your Reform Party is more of a volunteer network?”

“Well, I certainly don’t attribute it to my political or oratorical skills. I think it’s the power of the ideas that people follow, not me. I am just fortunate to have become a focal point for some of their aspirations.”

Jennifer jumped in.

“The same two parties have dominated American politics since before the Civil War. They have successfully excluded third parties

for over a century and a half. We have families here that resemble political royalty. It is time for the Americans to have more choices!”

Barbara Stanlon allowed only the slightest note of irritation to slip into her melodic voice.

“But, Mrs. Rostin-Kron, your grandfather, Sam Baker, was the embodiment of the same two-party system that you just criticized. He served in Congress for over thirty years.”

“My grandfather retired from politics two years ago. At the end of his career, he grew ashamed of the current system, where the political elite evolved into a new caste, aligned with moneyed interests and desperately fighting to stay in power and exclude outsiders,” Jennifer testily replied. “I know, I am his granddaughter. Please leave him out of it.”

Barbara Stanlon composed herself and smiled into the camera.

“A very interesting response from Mrs. Rostin-Kron, but I am being told it’s time for a commercial break. We’ll be back soon, don’t change the channel.”

After making sure they were off the air, she turned to the Krons.

“Jennifer, is attacking the main political parties on the air your party’s election-year tactic? I think your husband has been, while critical, somewhat more circumspect in his comments.”

“Ah, you should see her at home.” Jeff Kron laughed. He seemed to have become more relaxed after his wife’s outburst. “Yes, perhaps I’ve been more diplomatic in what I said. But Jennifer’s statement represents my views as well.”

“Welcome back to our viewers.” Barbara Stanlon smiled into the camera. Turning back to Krons, she said, “So, Jeff, do you agree with your wife’s statement?”

“Wholeheartedly.” Jeff nodded. “It’s been a very long time since we’ve seen any changes in our political system. A change is needed. Our Constitution was designed, above all, to prevent abuses from concentrating too much power in a small set of hands. But we have evolved this crony capitalism where the political regime has merged with economic and financial powers. Special interests fund politicians and then demand their dues. Lobbying distorts the process. A select

few gather dominant influence. Economic advantages are gained via political means. We are due for a change.”

“And what kind of change would you advocate in the political process?”

“I’ll quote Thomas Jefferson: *Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories.*” Jeff looked decidedly more self-assured. “We have to create a more competitive electoral process by introducing term limits, public financing of candidates and limited durations of campaigns. And we have to start eliminating the curse of lobbying. I would ask for a lifetime ban on lobbying by anyone who worked in the government. Plus, I think politicians must take an oath to not meet with lobbyists, to not accept money, gifts or dinners from lobbyists—or face recall. I am taking this oath right now, in front of millions of witnesses: I will never take money from special interests. Nor will I ever give even five minutes of my time to lobbyists.”

Jennifer smiled and squeezed her husband’s hand.

“I am sure many powerful people are not happy listening to your words right now,” Barbara carefully enunciated. “Does that concern you at all?”

“No. I am not running as their champion. I am not looking for their money. I am aiming to break the cycle of money politics. I believe we are all damaged by unfairness, by the unjustified privileges of crony capitalism.”

“That leads me to the next question,” said Barbara. “You’ve been a fierce critic of inequality in this country. Some people argued that you are either a socialist or a communist, take your pick. That you are trying to impose a utopian equality, to eliminate freedom in our society.”

“I am neither a socialist nor a communist.” Jeff laughed. “I am trying to save capitalism. I am not trying to impose equality. But the kind of extreme inequality that we evolved—it can’t be tolerated any longer. In our country, the top one tenth of one percent have more wealth than the bottom ninety percent. No society can survive this for long.”

“And you’ve been trying to change this by advocating nonviolent resistance?”

“As one American president said not too long ago,” Jennifer interjected, “*Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.*”

“Umm, which president was it?” replied Barbara.

“John Fitzgerald Kennedy.”

“Yes, JFK said this. It was true then, and it is true now,” said Jeff. “We have to restore social trust, and we have to break the vicious cycle where economic inequality leads to political inequality and to gaining further economic advantage through political means, thus farther enriching a few at the expense of many. This can’t be changed by reason alone.”

“So you justify active resistance?”

“I justify nonviolent disobedience in some cases. We share common humanity. Secular power is not defensible if it contradicts moral principles.”

“Like John Galt, you want to stop the motor of the world?” asked Barbara mockingly.

“No, I want to change how the motor runs,” responded Jeff calmly. “We will have a better society if we stop leaving the majority of the population behind. We will have a better society if we put morality and fairness into the equation. Jobs and good pay are the main mechanisms to support a flourishing market economy. Drops in living standards make people eager to turn to anyone offering simple—but dangerous—solutions.”

“Are you referring to your opponent, John Dimon?”

“I believe his message of blaming external enemies is dangerous. Much of our predicament is of our own doing. Did the Chinese make us run up our debts? Did they force us into the perpetual expensive warfare we’ve been engaged in for decades? At what point did we assume the right to militarily intervene anywhere in the world?”

“Mr. Dimon referred to you as ‘the leader of Blame America First’ movement. How would you respond?”

“I would say that I want this country to be great again, but that we won’t get there by leaving half of our population on food stamps and in minimum wage jobs. Nor would we get there by refusing to talk about our faults and labeling those who criticize the government

as unpatriotic. There is a fine line between patriotism and nationalism and Mr. Dimon is on the wrong side of that line.”

Barbara checked the time.

“We have only a few minutes left. Jeff, can you tell our viewers what would be the most crucial imperative that you would pursue if you were elected President?”

“Only one?” Jeff Kron smiled.

Barbara Stanlon smiled back. “Yes, only one.”

“All right. I would focus the government on protecting the mass market. I am a strong believer in free market, but left completely to its own devices the market concentrates wealth and income to the point of self-destruction, especially in an increasingly ‘winner-takes-all’ digital society, especially in a progressively automated economy where robots are cheaper than people. I’m not here to preach: extreme inequality is not just a moral issue, it’s a business issue as well. It destroys the mass market and the society itself. A hundred years ago Henry Ford famously doubled his workers’ wages so they would want to work for him and, importantly, be able to buy products such as his Model-T’s. That’s how we built the middle class in this country, the cornerstone of our democracy. Somehow, we forgot this lesson. Fifty years ago, more than a half of our households were in the middle class. Now, it’s about one third. When people at the very top take more and more for themselves, it impoverishes the society. When the CEO of a company fires a thousand people and gives himself a multi-million-dollar bonus, what do you think happens to the mass market? The CEO might buy himself five cars, but the thousand people that lost their jobs won’t buy any. And as the market goes, so does our economy: we can build the most wonderful products, but fewer and fewer people can afford them.”

“Thank you. That’s quite a response.” Barbara Stanlon exhaled, checked the time again.

“One quick last question: Jeff, what is making you run?”

Jeff looked down, gathering his thoughts.

“A famous writer once said that it’s our desire to belong to the Inner Circle that makes us do the worst things, make the worst

compromises. I run for all those that are not in the Inner Circle, those that are in a much larger Outer Circle. I want to be their champion.”

“And that’s the end of our program for today,” concluded Barbara Stanlon.

*Los Angeles, USA*

Maggie woke up later than usual. She remembered being wide awake at one in the morning, listening to David's gentle snoring. What would her life have been like if two years ago he did not walk into the restaurant that she waitressed in? Whenever she wondered, she also remembered that morning at Balboa Lake when he came ready to sacrifice himself in order to save her, a virtual stranger. He could have slapped a handcuff on her wrist, that's how resolutely he bound the two of them. Their fates were now tied, for better or for worse. She would do anything, give herself to anyone in order to protect him.

In her dream last night, she was back on the Black Rock in Maui. David handed her the little Seagate thumb-drive that could stop everything. She threw the drive into the ocean, but there was no splash. Instead, the drive was back in her palm. She threw it again and again, but the drive refused to leave.

When she woke up this morning, David's side of the bed was empty. Maggie brushed her teeth, washed up and followed the sound of voices into the kitchen. Alejandro, Oleg, and David were talking to a burly man with a sun-beaten face, wearing a stained green shirt, brown canvas pants, heavy workboots and a dirty straw hat. Upon seeing Maggie, then man took off his hat and nodded.

"Ma'am."

Alejandro introduced him. "This is Ubaldo."

"Maggie." She offered her hand, which he shook gently.

Ubaldo's hands were calloused; the man was no stranger to physical work.

Maggie poured a cup of coffee. "What are you gentlemen plotting so early in the morning?"

Oleg laughed. "Ubaldo is explaining to me the basics of gardening."

"What? Why?" *Are they treating this as a joke?*

"Ubaldo and his crew do weekly gardening for Jeff and Jennifer Kron," explained Alejandro.

“Excuse me, I have to go,” Ubaldo said, then turned to Oleg. “I will pick you up in two days.”

“Do you want to explain?” asked Maggie after Ubaldo left.

“It’s all very simple: that’s how we will get Oleg in touch with Jennifer Kron, *née* Rostin,” clarified Alejandro.

“And you just happen to know and trust their gardener?”

“I know and work with many gardeners,” said Alejandro. “They are the backbone of the new ‘grey sharing’ economy.”

“*Grey sharing* what?” David and Maggie exclaimed in unison.

“Oh yes, the three of you have been out of the country. There have been some changes since you left.”

“Like what?”

“People have been increasingly sharing things using convenient phone apps. You need a ride, contact Uber. You need a place to stay in another town, use AirBnB. Then the government started taxing these services...”

“That started while we were still here,” pointed out David.

“Yes, and the government became increasingly more aggressive about taking their cut because it was grabbing business from other, tax-paying enterprises. In some countries they even outlawed cash so that governments could follow the money trail. They tried to do it here but have not been able to push this through. At least not yet. In any case, people started leaving these apps for untaxed ones, like a grey market. That’s why we call it ‘grey sharing.’ I am dabbling in this. Well, perhaps more than dabbling.”

Maggie sat at the table across from Alejandro, sipped her coffee. Years of studying economics had her sense of curiosity tingling.

“Do explain. I thought you were in the... how shall I put it... recreational drugs business?”

“No, I got out soon after Oleg’s boss was killed and the three of you went on the run. It got too dangerous at that point. I was looking for something new to do. As I told you earlier, it was the identity changes that Javier performed on you that inspired me to look into the privacy business. As I thought about it, I figured that just protecting someone’s privacy, reducing his ‘gridprint’ is not enough

because they still have to use services that require identifications, credit cards and such. That was my *Eureka!* moment.”

Maggie laughed, “OK, once you shouted *Eureka*, what did you do?”

“We now maintain platforms of apps where people trade goods and services in private,” explained Alejandro. “We use a token system. There are tokens for everything: babysitting, painting a house, cooking dinner, hosting a movie showing. For many people now these tokens are money, they store value and can be traded for stuff. The concept is not new, the scope is. Here, let me show you.”

Alejandro moved his finger on the phone’s screen and a 3-D image projected in the air just above the table. It consisted of multiple planes of two-dimensional tables of characters and numbers.

“See, Maggie, this is the top view of the database of our local neighborhood, roughly eleven thousand people, three thousand households. Almost twelve hundred participate in the program. So you have twelve tables of a hundred households each. The left-most column is the encoded identifier for each participant. With multiple levels of indirection, even I don’t know who these people are. Other columns show how many tokens they have, what services they are able to offer, what orders they have in the pipeline, and more.”

“Why have people moved to such bartering systems?” Maggie wondered. “Because that’s what it is, old-fashioned bartering like in ancient times, except on very modern computer platforms. That’s why money was invented, to simplify and streamline this bartering.”

“I am not debating the benefits of money, but when the convenience of traditional electronic money carries the price of losing privacy, some people see it as a tradeoff where convenience doesn’t always win. Perhaps because they start valuing other things. And this is not a simple bartering system. The proof of each transaction is absolute and stored on multiple independent computers. We use the system not only as money, but for contracts and agreements as well. These tokens are based on a derivative of a D-coin technology, one of the bitcoin’s descendants. But unlike regular electronic money, D-coin is completely decentralized and not transparent to the government. The tokens are redeemable outside of our local communities because we blockchain them into a centralized ledger

shared with other such systems. For a small fee, D-coin payment processors will exchange tokens for traditional currencies so people can transact outside of the system.”

“The government must hate this!”

“Of course. People are buying less, they show less income, they don’t show purchases. You have lower demand, lower income taxes, lower sales taxes. The government tried to tax legitimate point-based services so many went underground, into the grey market. Some are doing this as a matter of principle. They believe that they no longer have the power, that the government represents the monied interests, not them. What did they say two hundred and fifty years ago: *no taxation without representation?* This slogan is now all over the place. People are going ‘off the grid’ or ‘minimizing their gridprint’ as they call it: little to no official income, no bank accounts, no credit cards.”

“This actually sounds familiar. Where I was growing up, half of the economy was unofficial. But what’s your role? If people share locally, why would they need your help? Can’t they use this D-coin technology directly?” Maggie asked. “And why are the gardeners a backbone of this ‘grey sharing’ economy?”

“Well, I may have exaggerated slightly about the gardeners.” Alejandro laughed. “Not all the business can be done locally. You may travel. And if you need your car fixed, not every neighborhood has a mechanic that can work on it. We provide wider reach, we ensure—by some old-fashioned methods—that the rules are respected. Most important, we provide privacy and anonymity. Regulated virtual currency is not opaque to the government. Remember, the government very much wants to control these activities. And they have cameras everywhere—even in your own TV—they have drones watching from overhead, they search your e-mail and texts. We secure our apps. All sensitive data is stored on servers outside of the country. Each transaction is broken into small pieces to make it indecipherable to interception. Everything is divided into local cells of a hundred people or so, each person knows only his or her codename and we keep identity tables completely separate from the apps. If someone breaks into a local cell, they get limited data and they don’t know who the people are. This is a

decentralized autonomous system for people that want to tell the government to go screw itself.”

“Never knew you to be a computer person.” Oleg shook his head.

“I’m not. I don’t have to be. This is like a Gold Rush where I sell shovels. We use mostly an off-the-shelf software, especially the D-coin part. And people themselves are now sophisticated enough to avoid devices that spy on them. A year ago, the Feds tried to convict someone using data captured from a backdoor in his phone. In three days, that phone manufacturer’s sales collapsed. What’s important for us is to have discipline and to have systems around the software. If I can’t enforce the rules, does not matter how good the software is. If I can’t deliver the ordered goods outside of the official system, I can’t support the service. The bottom line is, any system must be underpinned by people trusting it. That’s what I do: use my resources to ensure the trust. By the way, that’s where the gardeners come in: they provide delivery and, if needed, an old-fashioned communication that can’t be intercepted electronically. Large digital systems are transparent because they have to allow new people in. To make ours non-transparent, we have to have some non-electronic connections built in.”

*Beijing, China*

“Walk with me, Comrade Yang,” offered Kai Liu.

“Of course, Comrade General Secretary,” said Sun Yang.

They were in a park near a Buddhist temple, the security agents nearby but keeping a respectful distance.

“Comrade Yang, you expressed some reservations about General’s Cao’s proposal to annex Taiwan. Do you think we should not be attempting reunification of the island?”

“Comrade General Secretary, I believe the island must be reunited with the mainland. But I think we have to be careful and consider the bigger picture. The generals only too often focus on the immediate battle. General Cao is a hammer looking for a nail. I wanted to challenge him to be deliberate and consider all possible scenarios. I was playing the devil’s advocate, so to speak.”

Kai Liu took a few steps, stopped to look at the other man.

“So you are in favor of the Taiwan takeover, even though it means war with the U.S.?”

“I am. But I want to make sure we win the war. We must only attempt the reunification when we are sure of the positive outcome.”

“How much longer do you think we should wait? We’ve been preparing for many years.”

“Ideally, I would have preferred to attack when we, on our own, are militarily superior to the Americans. But I want to hear General Cao’s proposal. Our internal situation favors initiating our expansion soon.”

Kai Liu resumed his deliberate walking.

“And you think we can overcome our military deficiencies?”

“Comrade Secretary, I consider the geopolitical situation to be in our favor now. We always knew that the American strategist Brzezinski was right: the key to world supremacy lies in ruling the Eurasian continent. Since the 1990s, we fought the “cold war” against the Americans for control of Eurasia. We won. We secured our continental borders. We welcomed the Russians when the Americans ignored them. We then saved the Russians when the Americans tried to choke them with economic warfare ten years ago.”

“Are you counting on their gratitude? We did this for our own benefit.”

“Of course! We needed them to control Eurasia. Had we let the Russians fall, we would have lost our most important energy supplier and military ally. As it is, the U.S. and Russia are now enemies and the Russians are aligned with us both by choice and by necessity. We have also normalized our relations with India. We don’t have to worry about our inland borders.”

“Should we perhaps wait until there is a new administration in Washington? Is there a way to avoid a military confrontation by reaching some kind of agreement with the Americans?”

Sun Yang shook his head.

“No matter who is in power in Washington, they will come to Taiwan’s aid; this can’t be avoided. They can’t afford to be seen as unable to protect their allies. Their power is on the decline but we have to take it from them; they won’t relinquish it without a fight. We, together with the Russians, are the largest continental power. The Americans are the largest naval power. We and the Americans are in a similar situation: expand or die.”

Kai Liu turned around and started slowly walking back. The security agents quickly rearranged their order and enclosed a protective bubble around the two men.

“How do you think other countries will react?”

Sun Yang nodded. “Very important question, and one that the generals often don’t sufficiently explore. We’ll have to offer something to India for their neutrality. Japan is spent and bankrupt, they won’t do anything. The Europeans are too far away.”

“What about Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia?”

“I think they’ll stay neutral, not wanting to bet on the wrong horse. They, by now, have a closer economic relationship with us than with the Americans. But we should be proactive, let them know that we have no territorial ambitions beyond Taiwan.”

Kai Liu stopped again, looked at Sun Yang.

“The Americans believe that they are better able to win a protracted war because of their superior navy. Do you think that’s the case?”

“Not necessarily. Because of our alliance with Russia, we are no longer so dependent on maritime trade. When combined, China and Russia are independent in energy and most other resources. It will be difficult for the Americans to blockade us.”

“The Americans can attack the pipelines between our countries.”

“They know that if they take the war to our mainland, we’ll take it to theirs. Their people have not had a war on the American soil in many years. They won’t risk it.”

Secretary Liu resumed walking, chewed on his lip.

“Comrade Yang, I want you to be a part of the small group that will evaluate General Cao’s proposal. I am concerned that the military tends to engage in a groupthink, that they don’t want to show disagreement in front of the civilian government. Against their powerful network we often only think that we are in control. Please continue challenging General Cao’s assumptions. We need someone to be the devil’s advocate. And we have to be careful in our ambitions, without falling into imperial thinking. That’s what generals usually do. They set up a forward position to protect their current line. Then the new line comes under attack and they ask to establish another, further forward position. And so on, until the country goes broke.”

## *Farmington, USA*

It was a slow day in the small office. Fourth of July was the previous week and some people took the advantage of making this a long vacation. By the evening, Jim Brobak was the only one left. Not that it mattered greatly, but it made him feel better. He wouldn't have to explain why he was using an old touch-screen 3-D display instead of the modern projection one manipulated by hand and eye signals. 3-D displays were supposed to be used for highly classified work, but hardly anyone bothered these days.

Jim pulled out a sheet of paper with the account numbers and the search parameters that David Ferguson asked him to run. Jim didn't want to carry the secure phone with him; it was safer to keep the phone hidden in the backyard. The FBI computer system had access to all the financial transactions systems operating within the U.S. and to select international systems and networks.

Executing the queries that David requested from 2020 to the current day took less than ten minutes. Jim saved the gigabytes of results data and was about to log out, when he had an idea. The FBI had access to databases of relationships between entities. Be it people, known relations and friendships, business connections, pets, cars, properties, corporations, charities, churches, other organizations—every known connection was in one of the searchable databases. Volumes and volumes of data were sitting there, available to be searched by anyone with proper access.

Jim had no love lost for statistics, but some knowledge was mandatory for FBI agents. Actually, in the past few years knowledge of statistics became the number one priority for all white-collar workers. The more data was out there, the higher was the premium on trying to make any sense out of it. Jim added more entity relationships databases to Ferguson's queries by specifying "degrees of separation"  $N = 2$  and asking for the *p-value* of less than 0.005, indicating that there was at least a 50% correlation between a data set

and a particular entity. The query took longer and came up with zero results.

Jim looked at his watch; it was 7 p.m. He was hungry, he did what Ferguson asked him; his conscience was clear. Still, he did not feel satisfied. Two degrees of separation typically captured extended family, co-workers and known friends. To dig deeper, you have to go to “the third degree” as some called it. Of course, that would mean throwing a much larger net of possibly billions of entities. That would take many hours and burn through a big chunk of the FBI’s computer utility, presenting the Farmington office with a highly noticeable and difficult to explain bill. If he wanted to raise the degrees of separation, he'd have to narrow somewhere else.

Interfaces to the SOFI, the Russian-Chinese financial system. The system was opaque, but from prior experience he knew that the SWIFT – SOFI interface was processed in batches and there was some degree of correlation between transactions in each batch. While transactions were not necessarily correlated, they had a higher chance of being a part of a related order execution than transactions in different batches.

Brobak added a variable of using only the data from transactions that terminated at one of the SOFI’s gateways and were in the same batch. He took a deep breath, set  $N = 3$  and ran the query. Twenty minutes later, the search ran its course. There were two results that met the statistical significance criteria. One person, John Dimon. One corporation, FreedomShield.

Jim rubbed his face, thinking. John Dimon and FreedomShield had a statistically meaningful probability to be correlated—at a distance of three degrees of separation—to each other and to transactions going into the SOFI’s “black hole.” It could have been something, it could have been nothing. Jim was not a big believer in coincidences. He expanded the details—over 99% of the executions were deposits, coming from SOFI and going into accounts here.

Brobak saved the results. After getting home, he retrieved the secure phone from its hiding place and sent the data to the Newfoundland phone number, together with a brief explanation. It was almost 10 p.m. when he finally sat down to eat his dinner.

About two thousand miles away, in Virginia, a silent alarm went off. It was programmed to be triggered when a statistically significant search of designated entities and variables was detected. The difficulty with setting alarm triggers was that there were so many possible parameters to watch for. The people that programmed the alarm system were cautious, worried about their jobs. After all, people got fired for missing something important, not for triggering a false alarm. As a result, hundreds of alarms were being triggered daily, leading to a certain “alarm fatigue” amongst the computer security staff. The person that saw the alarm had been just recently been laughed at for giving “Priority 1” to a couple of silly IRS searches. He checked that the searches originated at the FBI, a friendly organization, and assigned the alarm “Priority 3,” to be reviewed when the time allowed.

*Peredelkino, 13 miles southwest of Moscow, Russia*

“It’s a nice little *dacha* you got yourself, General.” The man that called himself simply “Arkady” unceremoniously poured a nice-sized glass of brandy and stretched in a leather chair. “It doesn’t even feel right to refer to it as a *dacha*. It’s more like a little summer palace. Something that a smaller czar would build.”

It was the fourth time that General Yuriy Shelkov had to see Arkady and he absolutely hated the man. Hated his tallness, his mocking, nasal voice, his hairy hands. But Shelkov knew who was behind Arkady and did not dare to antagonize the man. Perhaps one day, when the time was right, he’d get his payback.

“What do you want?” asked Shelkov, not friendly but not particularly hostile.

“You sound a touch resentful. But why, Yuriy Denisovich?” feigned Arkady. “After all, you are now the Minister of Defense just as I promised the first time we saw each other. And your future looks quite bright.”

“Let’s just get down to business,” sighed Shelkov.

“Yes, of course, you are a busy man with many responsibilities,” Arkady agreed with a smirk. “How are the joint exercises with the Chinese going?”

“They are going fine.” Shelkov was not going to volunteer anything.

“I trust our Pacific Fleet carriers successfully rendezvoused with the Chinese fleet in the South China Sea?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, Yuriy Denisovich, play hard to get.”

Shelkov felt a strong desire to throw his own glass at the man’s head.

Arkady grew serious. “Well, enough pleasantries. Things are moving. I will be back here in a few days. You will host an important planning meeting. Call some of the Western Military District commanders here to discuss upcoming inspections.”

“What inspections?”

“Who cares? The ones you are supposedly going to conduct.” Arkady waved irritably.

“Who am I supposed to call?”

“You will call Colonel General Valery Pashin of the Western Military District, General Maxim Popovich of the 77<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Division, and Colonel Aleksander Mironov of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Spetsnaz Regiment.”

Shelkov’s mouth went dry.

“These are the units concentrated around Moscow,” Shelkov’s words came out ragged.

“Yes, my dear Yuriy Denisovich. The time for games is coming to an end. Also, Pavel Zaporozets from the GRU and Dmitry Kolotov from the Internal Affairs.”

Shelkov swallowed. “When am I calling them here and why?”

“When—I’ll let you know in few days. Why—you’ll find out at the meeting.”

Arkady finished the brandy and got up to leave. At the door, he turned around.

“One more thing. How recent are the Ministry’s plans for attacking to the West? You should know; you were the Chief of the General Staff until a few months ago.”

“Well, we review them periodically,” stumbled a surprised Shelkov.

“Oh come on, Yuriy Denisovich! We all know what these reviews are. No, I am talking about serious, detailed, nuts to bolts planning. How long ago?”

“A few years.” Shelkov shrugged. “Who cares? We aren’t anticipating an attack from the West and we have not seriously looked in that direction in quite some time.”

“Well, the times are changing. And given how long these things take, might as well start now. Look at the plans to occupy the Baltic States, Western Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.”

“But... but we are looking at moving some of the forces from the Western and the Southern Military Districts to the east, towards China. That won’t leave us with enough to attack to the west!”

“General, plans are just plans. For the western attack, assume that no forces will be moved to the east. Keep it quiet.”

Arkady went, leaving Shelkov with his thoughts. *How did he end up in this predicament?* His great-grandfather became an officer in the Red Army during the Civil War. His grandfather commanded a tank division and ended the Great Patriotic War in Berlin in 1945. His father also commanded a division and fought the Chinese in 1969. All faithfully served the Motherland, the *Rodina*. And now he was supporting what looked like a possible military coup. Perhaps he should go to Kremlin and confess everything. Except that he may have already gone too far to be forgiven. Except that his grandson Valeriy, whom he shipped off to a minor diplomatic post abroad, would meet with a violent end. Arkady made a point of emphasizing this.

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jennifer absentmindedly put away the last of the glasses from the dishwasher and removed from the 3-D appliances printer a copy of the tea cup she broke yesterday. Two cars were parked on the street in front: a long-familiar older Jeep and an unmarked Secret Service vehicle. After all the death threats, Jeff finally agreed to accept the Secret Service protection. Jennifer brought out coffee and homemade muffins earlier and chatted with occupants of both cars. She suggested to the two supporters of Jeff in the Jeep, young guys in their twenties, that with the Secret Service now present around the clock they could take a break.

The guys just laughed. “Mrs. Kron, we have our shift and we’ll stay here even if they send the whole LAPD!”

The reception at the unmarked car was mixed: the older man in the driver’s seat stared ahead and replied politely but not in a friendly manner, while his younger partner leaned over and beamed.

“Mrs. Kron, our whole family is rooting for your husband!”

*Mixed...* Yes, that was a common reaction she and Jeff were getting these days. Like during the last weekend’s neighborhood concert in the park. Some were cheering them on, others staring angrily. The neighbor from across the street demonstratively pulled “Dimon ‘24” cap on his head. The police and photographers hovering nearby were not helping either. Jeff kept insisting that they were still the same regular people, but it seemed more and more a “let’s pretend” game. Sadly, the easy neighborhood camaraderie was gone and many blamed them. Was it worth it? Too late to ask this question. *Accidental politicians...*

A beaten-up old Ford pickup pulled up to the curb, just like it had every week for years. One of few luxuries that they allowed themselves: a gardener. Ubaldo, in his straw hat, appeared and waved when he saw Jennifer in the window. He was accompanied by his usual helper, José, carrying a shovel and another man that Jennifer had not seen before. The man carried a potted tree—must be the lemon tree that she asked Ubaldo to plant a couple of weeks ago.

She wiped her hands and rushed out of the house to show where exactly she wanted the tree planted. Ubaldo greeted her with a big smile showing a missing tooth in front.

“Mrs. Jennifer, how are you today?”

“Fine, Ubaldo, thank you. And you?”

“Very good, Mrs. Jennifer. This is Pedro.” Ubaldo pointed to the man with the tree. “He is learning gardening.”

“Ma’am.” Pedro nodded. Between the tree and a large hat, she could not see Pedro’s face, but he had an accent that did not sound Pedro-like.

“Nice to meet you, Pedro,” she said carefully. “And good to see you, José. Now, let me show you where it should be planted.”

She walked around the side, to the back of the house. A long time ago they wanted to put in a pool, but they never had enough money. For years, it was a playground area for their daughter.

“Here.” Jennifer pointed out to the corner across from the dining room window. “I want to see it from the window but have it far enough from the fence so as not to let it grow into the neighbor’s yard.”

“Yes, Mrs. Jennifer. Good location,” Ubaldo agreed. Pedro put down the tree and took the shovel from José without saying anything.

Jennifer went back into the house, pulled from the fridge the pitcher of lemonade she made yesterday, poured three glasses and placed them on a tray. She saw from the window that Ubaldo and José were now in front trimming bougainvillea bushes and went to see them first. A thin mosquito noise of a police drone overhead was just a familiar background by now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Jennifer.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jennifer.”

She smiled. For years she’d been trying to get Ubaldo and José to drop “Mrs.” and just call her Jennifer, to no avail.

In the back, Pedro was digging a hole, muscles playing in his broad back.

“Pedro, please have some lemonade.”

Pedro turned around. Under the broad hat, his face looked Slavic. He took the glass.

“Thank you, Mrs. Rostin.”

“Rostin-Kron,” she automatically corrected him.

“Mrs. Rostin, please try not to show any reaction. I’ve met your father, Pavel Rostin.”

Jennifer took a slight step back. *Father has been dead for eighteen years. Pedro... this man... he looks to be thirty. Is this some kind of a trap?*

Pedro reached to touch her hand. “I saw him in 2006 in St. Petersburg. My real name is Oleg Khmelco. I was fourteen at the time. I went with my uncle’s family to the Museum of Breaking the Leningrad Blockade. It was June twenty-second. The day that the war started. We went every year. In 2006, your father came with us. We went to the Piskariovskoye Cemetery afterwards, to your grandfather’s grave.”

He let go of her hand and with the other one gave the glass back to her.

“Thank you for the lemonade. We should not talk here any longer. There is something very important that you need to know. For a month, we’ve been trying to figure out how to safely get in touch with you. After we leave, come check the tree. There will be a message.”

Jennifer went back into the house, slowly as not to betray her trembling knees. She anxiously pattered in the kitchen, drank a cup of coffee while watching Ubaldo and José work on the bougainvillea. Pedro... no, Oleg... came out to the front with a shovel on his shoulder. All three gathered their tools, got into the Ford pickup and drove off. Jennifer, trying not to run, went into the backyard and pretended to inspect the lemon tree. Wedged into one of the branches was a rolled-up small piece of green paper. She carefully lifted it, looked at the tree some more and walked into the house.

A few hours later, the Secret Service car was replaced by another one. A man on the new shift asked, “Anything unusual today?”

“No. She offered us coffee and muffins. A gardener came with his crew. They trimmed bushes and planted a tree. A neighbor stopped by later.”

*Beijing, China*

General Wu Cao loved the view from his corner office. No matter how busy he was, at least once a day he would tell the secretary to hold his calls and stand by the window, meditating on his good fortune. Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission... he'd clawed his way up from humble beginnings, just like his country. He enjoyed the power of commanding others. He did not want to lose it. He did not want for his country to lose it.

The phone buzzed. Cao grimaced at being interrupted, then remembered that it was time for his meeting with Admiral Kaiping Li of the PLA Navy. That was the reason for his anxiety. *We'd like for you to give stronger consideration to the views of Admiral Kaiping Li*, said the man on the phone. The Admiral then knew that he, Wu Cao, was being controlled. Of course, the Admiral himself must be controlled by the same man.

“Good afternoon, General Cao.” the Admiral nodded politely.

“Good afternoon, Admiral.”

They had exchanged pleasantries, talked about their families, all the while physically feeling the unease of what must remain unspoken. Cao's secretary brought their tea. It was not the first such conversation they had, but the edginess was always there.

Finally, Cao turned to the topic at hand.

“Admiral, I appreciate our discussions. One can't overstate the importance of bringing Taiwan back under our rightful control. Last time we talked, you were going to work some more on the plans and the timing of the operation from the Navy's perspective. In particular, the role and the importance of the Russian Pacific Fleet.”

“Yes, the Russian Fleet.” The Admiral sipped his tea. “I've had extensive war game simulations and discussions with my senior officers. We concluded that the highest probability of success in crippling the American Seventh Fleet lies in using the Russian Pacific Fleet as a bait.”

“A bait?”

“Yes. We hope to deny the Americans ability to enter the East China Sea, primarily using our edge in missiles. But we can’t be assured of success, especially at such a long distance. We have to plan for the scenario where the Seventh Fleet breaks through and approaches Taiwan. If the Russian Pacific Fleet is positioned in the East China Sea, say about two hundred miles southeast of Shanghai, the Americans will have to attack it. They won’t risk having two hostile aircraft carriers at their back.”

“And we will direct the Russians to come close to the shore so we can protect them with our land aircraft and ground-to-air missile batteries.” Cao nodded.

“Not quite, General. If the Russians are close to our shore, the US Seventh Fleet won’t send most of their aircraft to attack them. The Americans will not risk their pilots and they won’t see the Russians as much of a threat if the Russian Fleet is far from the action.”

“But the Seventh Fleet is much stronger. It will annihilate the Russians!”

“Yes, capability-wise the American Fleet is at least three times more powerful. They will sink the Russian carriers,” agreed the Admiral.

“And how do we gain from this?” Cao could not hide his bewilderment.

“We will strike the Seventh Fleet at the moment when most of their capabilities are deployed against the Russians. We will hold enough missiles, airplanes and submarines in reserve to deal them a deadly blow. This is the ideal scenario for us: with both American and Russian fleets destroyed, we are the ones left standing.” The Admiral took another sip of tea, his face showing no emotion.

Cao stared at Admiral Li for a minute. *I have to watch my back with this man. He is smart and has no scruples.*

“I like this plan. I hope we manage to keep the Seventh Fleet far away from Taiwan, but if we can’t, this could be a blessing in disguise. But what if the Russians don’t join?”

“I am afraid that without them, if we can’t deny the Americans from entering the East China Sea, and if they get close to Taiwan

within the first ten days of the conflict, our chances of successfully concluding the operation decline to perhaps fifty percent.”

“The *Politburo* won’t accept such risks.” Cao shook his head.

“No, they won’t. But I’ve heard that the Russians will soon change their policy direction. Some fresh blood with fresh thinking... Have you heard the same?” Kaiping Li looked at Wu Cao with an open, innocent expression.

“Yes, I’ve heard it too,” granted Cao unhappily. *Does this jerk have to rub in that he knows what’s going on behind the scenes?*

The Admiral made some noises about taking too much of his host’s time, started getting up, then remembered, “Oh, the timing... We recommend that the operation be conducted in January.”

“Why January? I thought we’d be ready by November.”

“I don’t want to underestimate how long the preparations will take. When the logistics department gives me a date, I always add a couple of months to it. Plus, the Americans are now on alert with all the demonstrations the Party organized in front of their embassy. Let things die down a bit; let them think everything’s back to normal. Also, if we do it right on the day they change presidents, that’ll hamper their decision-making, perhaps buy us a couple of critical days. Once we occupy Taiwan, our military position gets much stronger.”

General Cao rocked in his chair, not convinced he wanted to wait that long.

“It was suggested to me that we should wait to attack until January,” repeated Kaiping Li. His expression left no doubt about the source of the suggestion.

*I hate this man,* thought Wu Cao.

*Washington, D.C., USA*

A bespectacled man in a business suit with a cravat stood on a podium in the middle of an empty stage. He cleared his throat.

“Welcome! I am Chris Meadow, editor of *USA Daily*. We are the largest old-fashioned newspaper in the country. ‘Old-fashioned’ because, unlike everyone else, we still distribute a paper edition. So I think it’s quite symbolic that I get to run the largest virtual presidential town hall meeting ever! The actual physical stage around me is empty and will remain so. John Dimon, the leading presidential candidate—and the rest of the country, at least those with modern TV sets—will join me in an immersive experience that will feel like we are all in the same giant room. Of course, this is not new for most of you; immersive virtual meetings and town halls have been going on for a few years now. But this is the first time the technology is being applied on this scale to a nationwide audience.”

Meadow took a drink of water and made a broad sweep of his arm.

“We will fill the virtual room with five hundred viewers that enabled the ‘immersive interaction’ on their sets and gave us permission to use them. We had hundreds of thousands of willing viewers so the selection was done randomly. And then we, of course, filtered the selected pool”—Meadow laughed politely—“to avoid episodes of nakedness or inappropriate behavior. We employ a slight delay so any misbehavior can be removed before it becomes offensive. I know some programs encourage their immersive viewers to act in a lewd or improper manner, but not us. Bring in the audience, please!”

The screen filled up with hundreds of cheering people dressed in all manner of clothing and in all environments. Those that ended up immersed next to each other would shake virtual hands and introduce themselves. Almost immediately, a few of the people disappeared—undoubtedly for “inappropriate behavior”—and were replaced by others.

After a minute of din, Meadow raised his hands palms up.

“Let’s settle down and get to the main event. Please meet John Dimon, nominee of the Spirit of ‘76 party and the current leading

candidate for the President of the United States, joining us from his headquarters in Denver!”

A fog machine filled the stage with vapors and out of it ran a tall, rugged-looking man in a denim shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. He held a football in his outstretched hand that he threw at the audience. Some instinctively ducked, forgetting that Dimon was many miles away. The audience laughed.

Dimon ran over to Chris Meadow and gave him a virtual pat on the back, making Meadow squirm a touch. Upon recovering, Meadow spread his arms.

“What an entrance! Feels like we’re at the Super Bowl. What else would we expect from a flamboyant, decisive, man’s man from Colorado!”

Dimon bowed his head to a thunderous applause, spreading his arms as if to embrace the audience.

“My fellow citizens! My fellow patriots! Please allow me to say a few words before we begin. I am humbled standing here before you. I am grateful for the trust that you have given me. It was less than five years ago that I quit politics as usual and joined the Spirit of ‘76 movement. And it is a movement, not a party in a traditional sense: we are young and we are open to everyone who believes that America is the greatest country on the face of the Earth!”

Dimon masterfully paused to let the applause rise to a crescendo, lifting his arms with palms pointing up and then turning them over and lowering to bring the applause down. He looked like a skillful conductor managing his orchestra.

“We did not start with much money or many endorsements. Our campaign did not originate in the politics-as-usual halls of Washington. It began in this country’s heartland and spread east and west, north and south. It was built by working men and women, not by the power brokers from Washington and New York. This is not my campaign, this is your campaign!”

Dimon allowed another round of applause. There was a sudden commotion in the audience: the editors missed, by accident or on purpose, one young couple quickly shedding their clothing and the viewers and other audience members were treated to a few seconds

of intercourse. The video snippet would instantly end up on YouTube and social media networks and have seventeen million hits within four hours. The couple would be identified as Kimberly Johnson and Rick Spruce from Sacramento. Within the next twenty-four hours, they would be contacted by forty-six companies offering them money to promote or endorse products ranging from condoms to mattresses. Kimberly and Rick would end up making a porn film that would flop. They would be forgotten after a week.

Dimon offered a tense smile.

“Well, young people will be young people. It’s good to know that my followers bring so much enthusiasm and vitality to this town hall. But let us get back to the matter at hand. It’s not an accident that we call ourselves the Spirit of ’76 movement: we are a party of patriots! For many years have we been spreading freedom and democracy throughout this planet. Without American leadership, we face international anarchy. Yes, we believe that America is exceptional, that it’s been born to be exceptional, to rise and to continue as the most prosperous and powerful nation on Earth!”

Dimon spread his arms to welcome another round of applause.

“We are an open and welcoming party. But if you don’t believe in this country’s greatness, if you blame America first, if you believe that we must lower our ambitions, then we don’t want you! If that’s what you believe, if you don’t love this country unconditionally, then why are you here? Go to places that suit you better; we don’t hold anyone, our borders are open.”

Dimon clenched his hands into fists and brought them to his chest. He took a deep breath as if letting go of the emotion.

“For too long have we allowed our enemies to attack and undermine us without consequence! For too long have we allowed our jobs to be outsourced, our industries to be undermined by unfair trade agreements, our markets to be flooded with illegally subsidized goods! Our goodwill and openheartedness have been turned against us. And I say, no more! We will no longer let the foreign nations subvert us. Our military is the most powerful in the world. As Teddy Roosevelt told us over a hundred years ago: we speak softly but we carry a big stick. And if I am elected to lead this country, my

administration will not shy away from using it! We are not looking for a fight, but if the fight is taken to us then fight we will!”

This time, Dimon allowed the applause to go on until he saw his campaign manager Jonathan Morton making a downward movement with his palm.

“But not all of our problems come from abroad. Some are of our making. We have executives stealing tens of millions going free, but we throw someone in jail for stealing food. This is not fair! This is not the American Way! When I am the President, I will stomp out corporate crime by imposing such penalties that any white-collar thief would think twice before robbing even a penny from his workers!”

Dimon clasped his hands in front, his facial expression turned contemplative.

“A few days ago, I gave a short speech on the field of Gettysburg. I was humbled to stand on the same ground where Abraham Lincoln stood a hundred and sixty years ago, the ground that’s been hallowed by the brave men of that time. Like then, we are engaged in a great war. Only this time, the battlefield is much larger. Like then, we are not sure whether this nation, under God, will survive. In times like this, we need a strong government, a strong leadership, to protect the people and to help them. Let us resolve that we shall submit to the providence of the Lord, because his judgments are true and righteous, and that we shall fight together to give a new birth to freedom like our ancestors did.”

The applause was deafening.

Robert Treadwell and his production team were watching in their New York studio. Treadwell clapped his hands.

“OK, people, to work! We don’t have to wait for the Q&A part. Take Dimon’s speech, cut it up into video and text snippets. Make video versions from eight seconds to two minutes, nothing longer than that. Text editors, transcribe and pick out fragments of ten to twenty words. I want you to show me your list in fifteen minutes. We’ll pick a few and flood the social media with them.”

*Los Angeles, USA*

“Mr. Kron, thank you for agreeing to this interview with us.”

*After Ten's* host John Barry looked comfortable behind his desk. The same could not be said about Jeff Kron, who crossed and uncrossed his legs three times in two minutes. “This is the first time you have accepted such an invitation and I am honored to have this opportunity. Can you tell us what made you change your mind?”

“It’s not a *what* but a *who*.” Jeff smiled. “My campaign manager, Robert Marosyan, insisted. He thought I came across as a bit too not-mainstream in the Stanton interview.”

Marosyan, seated in the audience, moaned.

“And this has nothing to do with a recent popular nationwide appearance by your opponent John Dimon?”

Jeff Kron awkwardly shifted and replied, “You’ll have to ask Robert that. He is the strategist.”

Barry smirked. “Well, Robert isn’t here on the stage. Let’s start with an easy question. Are you sympathetic to *No Taxation Without Representation* posters that sprang throughout the country?”

“Yes. When citizens believe that the government represents not them but a small elite, they are right to feel left out.”

“And you are not troubled that some of these people break the rules and disappear, ‘drop out’ as they call it, in order to avoid complying with the laws?”

“When the state apparatus becomes all-powerful and the rules are too numerous to avoid stepping on, it’s natural for people to do anything and everything to protect their privacy and independence. That’s why they are going outside the system. ‘We the People’ is not synonymous with ‘We the Government.’ Sometimes people in power forget this.”

“But polls show that it’s a minority of people that feels this way. As a matter of fact, more than half pay no taxes at all.”

“That’s a part of the problem.”

“Why, are you opposed to these people having some minimum guaranteed income? Would you want them to starve?”

“No, of course not.” Jeff pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “I just think we are starting to resemble Aldous Huxley’s

*Brave New World*. Big swaths of society are completely dependent on the government that piles on ever-increasing debt to enable the situation. Just like in Huxley's vision, these 'lower castes' are encouraged to consume and to amuse themselves with entertainment, drugs, sex. Meanwhile, a small group of 'World Controllers' and 'Alpha-Plus' specialists manage the country."

"I don't remember that book, but I'd say it's a rather dark vision." John Barry turned to the audience and mockingly spread his arms. "We are entertaining millions of our viewers now and they don't seem to be unhappy about it. People *want* to be amused, distracted from their daily worries."

The audience laughed.

Jeff Kron, however, remained serious, unsmiling.

"You might well be right; many people might be more interested in being entertained than in who governs them and how. Freedom is an ambiguous gift. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve did not have to choose, did not have to think, did not care about being free. But the people that put up *No Taxation Without Representation* posters, they care. And I would like to think that the society that would rather keep more people on welfare than help them get fulfilling jobs is not doing right by those very people. We are now essentially an oligarchy, not a democracy."

"Hmm, that's a big charge to make!" Barry pulled down the corners of his mouth. "A great many people would disagree with you."

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but Princeton has done an exhaustive study of over twenty years of public policy issues. Their conclusion was unequivocal: economic elites and organized business interests have an outsized impact on US government policy, while average citizens have little or no influence. How else would you define an oligarchy?"

"Well, you know, academics and their studies..."

"Obviously, this is beyond academia now," retorted Jeff.

"Very well," John Barry smiled with his lips, not his eyes. "Jeff, you expressed some reservations about how our free market works. Are you calling for a centrally managed economy?"

“Not at all.” Jeff shook his head. “Not at all. If anything, it is powerful quasi-governmental institutions, such as the Federal Reserve, that attempt to centrally manage key parts of the economy. Did they really think that creating trillions of dollars out of thin air and using that to control society and prices would have no consequences? It’s a fantasy that economy and politics, market and state are completely separate. They are inextricably linked. The government can protect the market with incentives for behaviors that support the market, investments into public goods, and subsidies for basic necessities, while getting rid of non-essential regulation. The government can act to erect walls between itself and powerful special interests. The government can break up or nationalize any institutions that can threaten the market by monopolistic behavior. I want the government to protect the free market against powerful private interests, not manage the economy to protect those interests.”

“You’ve been viewed as not friendly to large financial institutions. Are you against the financial sector?”

“No, I am not. And to be clear, my criticism extends to some non-financial companies as well. Our economy is dominated by a handful of giant corporations. They often start as innovators but then vertically integrate to form near-monopolies. Is it really in the public interest to have the same companies control both creation and distribution of content? As for the finance, it is just as essential as production. But I am against the financial class skimming for themselves an inordinate share of the wealth and political clout. Jesus kicked the moneychangers out of the Temple for turning it into a den of thieves. It’s about time we do the same. These institutions have been granted an enormous amount of trust to manage the financial system—and they abused it. After repeated offenses, I do believe that social justice demands fundamental changes, from breaking up ‘too big to fail’ to turning some financial functions into public utilities.”

“Social justice? Don’t you just invite people to criticize you for being a socialist?” John Barry spread his arms in fake bewilderment.

“Respectfully, John, you’re missing the point!” Jeff retorted, pointing a finger at the host. “Justice and morality are not somehow separate from capitalism. Without societal cohesion, without social trust, there can be no economic growth. Just look how big chunks of

our market are disappearing into a 'grey economy.' When we allow immoral actions, they set in motion a reaction. We can't mouth moral laws without meaning them. A nation, like an individual, must have a conscience in order to survive."

"Thank you. That's quite a response." John Barry looked taken aback. "Since you brought up national conscience: Jeff—is America exceptional?"

Barry set back, a tiny "I got you now" smile playing on his lips.

"You know, John, that's a very good question." Jeff smiled back and John's smile disappeared. "To me, America is a concept, a state of mind, the province of free, empowered people. It's not simply a physical place. To be a shining city on the hill is a challenge that the founders gave us, not a given."

"I'm not sure I understand what you are saying." John Barry looked annoyed.

"I'm saying that our exceptionalism derives only from the legacy that we inherited from those who came before us. Someone said that 'freedom is participation in power'—that was our inheritance, giving everyone a chance to share in our governance. We must safeguard this heritage; we must never allow private interests to develop too much sway over the government. Americans are idealists. We want to pursue moral principles, but this does not automatically make everything that we do right. We should always hold a mirror to ourselves. We should not blindly extend our trust to the government and follow orders, because where does devotion end and submission to power begin? Do we have to strive for dominance in all matters? How does love of country become a reason to make war? We must educate ourselves so we know whether we are being well-governed. We should be proud of our country without being hostile to or dismissive of others. There is a fine line between pride and arrogance, we should not cross it. We should remember that secular power is not justified because of its mere existence but instead only if it's consistent with moral principles. That's what I mean by our exceptionalism."

Marosyan moaned again.

A small group of people gathered with drinks around a giant projection screen in a high-ceilinged room. One of them turned to others and said, "I told you, he is a dangerous communist. We can't afford to let him win."

*Beijing, China*

Eight men sat around the table in an office in Zhongnanhai imperial garden. The mood was deliberate, unsmiling.

General Secretary Kai Liu started the meeting.

“General Cao, we invited you to the Steering Committee to discuss your plan for Taiwan reunification.”

“Comrade General Secretary, thank you for the opportunity. Allow me to illustrate with the map.” Wu Cao walked over to the map now displayed on the wall. “China is vulnerable from the seas, our coast is wide open and not protected by any natural defenses. There are two island chains creating what we call ‘Near Seas’ and ‘Far Seas.’ The first chain stretches from the southern tip of Japan to Brunei and encompasses Taiwan and the two near seas, the South China Sea and the East China Sea. The second chain can be roughly drawn from the middle of Japan in a semi-circle through Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Micronesia and Palau, ending at the middle of Indonesia.”

“And except for Xisha, or Paracel Islands, we don’t own any of them!” pointed out Sun Yang. “So militarily, they don’t do us any good.”

“My esteemed colleague is correct on the first point,” acknowledged Wu Cao. “And until very recently, he would have been correct on his second point as well. The U.S. Seventh Fleet is stationed at the top of the second island chain, in Yokosuka, Japan. Despite recent reductions, it is still more powerful than any of the naval forces in the area, with over fifty ships, close to three hundred airplanes and over thirty thousand men. We have no aircraft carriers that can rival even the aging *Nimitz*-class carriers they have. And with no forward air or missile bases and limited precision of long-range missiles, we had no way of effectively countering them unless they sailed all the way to the eastern edge of Taiwan. Until now.”

Wu Cao went back to his seat to pour another glass of water. The room was silent, everyone watching him drink, put the glass back on the table and return to the map.

“About ten years ago we projected that it would take until mid-century to catch up with the U.S. Navy in ‘blue water,’ far-from-the-

land operations. But we have also recognized that some of the technological trends will revolutionize military affairs and perhaps allow for defensive outposts that do not require large-scale military bases but still support long-range operations. I am talking about missiles with advanced targeting capabilities and unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones as most people refer to them.”

“But General,” interjected Wang Hunshan, “I am as much in favor of returning Taiwan to its proper homeland as anyone, but only a couple of years ago we’d been told that our high-precision maneuverable anti-ship missiles operate at up to 150 miles. That’s enough to protect the Formosa Strait, but it won’t stop the Seventh Fleet from approaching Taiwan. And the much-ballyhooed Dong Feng 26D anti-ship ballistic ‘carrier killers’ don’t have sufficient precision to guarantee that we can stop the Americans.”

“Comrade Hunshan has a good memory.” Wu Cao nodded. “The range of high-precision missiles has been extended to 200 miles since then, but that’s still not enough to deny the Seventh Fleet access to the East China Sea and Taiwan’s vicinity. The DF-26D has a range of over 2,000 miles, but it’s hard to hit a moving target at such distance. And, as the existence of these missiles has been well known, the Americans likely developed their own defenses. However, I am not talking about large missiles each designed to destroy a major ship. Instead, these are smaller missiles designed to attack from the air and under the waterline. They are not capable of sinking a carrier but a multitude of them can make a carrier ineffective by crippling the flight deck, damaging the rudder, and knocking out communications facilities. They can also attack lesser-defended support ships, making it more difficult for the fleet to advance. Small and medium-size attack drones will provide a similar effect. Most important, they have a range of up to 500 miles and can operate without specialized bases or launchers.”

“Why is this important?” inquired Kai Liu.

“Over the past three years, we have built a number of oil and gas exploration platforms in the first and second island chains. The Japanese refuse to hand over to us the Diaoyu Islands, or the Senkaku Islands as they call them, but they gladly let us have oil exploration leases there. Six platforms were built in that area. The

second chain—the Caroline Islands, the Gilbert Islands, the Itbayat Island bordering the Luzon Strait—all have oil and gas platforms there now. And they are actively drilling. But they also secretly house hundreds of missiles and drones that can be launched against the Seventh Fleet. Once launched, they will be controlled by mainland operators using the *Qu Dian* C4ISR network and guided via our *Beidou* GPS system. Combined, the network of these platforms ensures that the Seventh Fleet will not be able to approach Taiwan without suffering a major, hopefully crippling attack, especially if used in combination with the DF-26D ballistic missiles that will occupy the Americans' attention.”

“But once these weapons are launched, the U.S. will know what to expect. They will destroy all the platforms in the network!” said Kai Liu.

“True,” agreed Wu Cao. “They are designed for one-time use: to damage the Seventh Fleet and prevent it from reaching Taiwan, or at least slow down its progress.”

“How much did you spend on this one-time use system?” asked Sun Yang.

“I don't have an exact number, but about 300 billion renminbi.”

“So with people rioting in the streets, the Navy has spent 300 billion renminbi on a secret program that may or may not work? And how many people will die in the American retaliation on these platforms?” Sun Yang was practically spitting saliva.

“Yes, there are sacrifices to be made!” angrily retorted Wu Cao. “Remember, our objective is to slow down a superior enemy, buy time. Given a couple of weeks without the U.S. opposition, our forces will take Taiwan and the Second Artillery Corps will install batteries of high-precision maneuverable theater-range ballistic missiles that will forever prevent the Seventh Fleet from coming close to Taiwan. And then we'll take the Diaoyu Islands from Japan and continue expanding the range of our missiles, pushing the U.S. out of “our seas” while we are building our own ‘blue water’ capabilities!” Cao pounded the table. “This is just the beginning. China's fate lies with the sea. Once we establish our hegemony over the adjacent seas, we will start replacing the U.S. as a dominant naval power by setting up our bases around the world.”

“Comrade Cao.” Kai Liu raised his palm. “You are asking us to take a major gamble with this untested network of platform-based missiles and drones. It’s not the kind of chance I like taking. The range of our high-precision missiles continues to expand. Why not wait until we can reliably stop the Seventh Fleet from approaching Taiwan? Is there anything else in your plan?”

“Comrade General Secretary,” demurred Cao. “It will take at least another ten years before our high-precision missiles have the range necessary to prevent the Americans from coming to Taiwan’s help. At least. Unfortunately, we can’t afford to wait this long. Not only does our economic situation dictate a quicker action, but the changing political climate in America as well. Since the 2019 crisis, the American mood has turned very anti-Chinese. The leader of the new Spirit of ‘76 party is planning to deploy American troops and missiles on Taiwan, and he is ahead in the polls now. If this is allowed to happen, not only will Taiwan be lost, but we’ll also be dealing with an even angrier domestic populace. And, of course, you are right—it would be imprudent for us to not have other surprises. As you know, we’ve been preparing for the next war to be the ‘information technology’ war. We have developed sophisticated capabilities for jamming American communication and information systems, including their GPS network. We know that this can only work temporarily, but again, we are looking for a short-term advantage.”

“And you think the Americans have not developed counter-jamming capabilities? What if your electronic attack won’t buy us any time? You are still asking us to gamble with unproven weapons!” Kai Liu was shaking his head to deny Cao’s plan.

“Comrade Liu, there is no doubt that the Americans will try to disable our space-based communication and guidance capabilities, just like we’ll try to disable theirs. This is actually one area where we have an advantage. In the near seas, we can rely on land-based communication and radar systems. In addition, our drone systems include not only attack but also communication platforms. We will launch a drone-based relay network that will cover the territory to the second island chain. It will enable us to maintain guidance and

communication even if our space-based resources become unavailable.”

“I am glad you thought of this, General Cao,” said Guo Zheng, Vice-Chairman of the Commission for Politics and Law, who’d been silent until then. “But war is unpredictable. What are the chances of the American Seventh Fleet breaking through your defenses and approaching Taiwan?”

Wu Cao nodded. “We ran hundreds of simulations with different scenarios and variables. If we can hold off the Americans for two weeks, we are ninety-nine percent confident that we’ll capture Taiwan and place ourselves in a position where we can’t be dislodged. In two out of every three simulations, we’ve been able to prevent the Americans from approaching Taiwan for at least two weeks.”

“Two out of three is simply not good enough!” Kai Liu looked at Wu Cao with a *Why did you even bother?* expression.

“I understand, Comrade General Secretary. We ran simulations of the scenarios where the Seventh Fleet gets to Taiwan before we had a chance to secure it. In at least half of the simulations, our missiles and land-based aircraft forces have been able to prevent them from effectively interfering.”

“General Cao, I don’t want to get caught up in numbers, but it sounds like we are still looking at almost twenty percent probability of failure. I will not take this chance.” Kai Liu shook his head.

“I understand and agree, Comrade General Secretary,” said Wu Cao. “We should not take this chance. But our risks can be significantly reduced with a strong ally. The Russian Pacific Fleet is in the area. In the past ten years they have rebuilt their capabilities and now have seventeen surface ships including two aircraft carriers and twenty-three submarines. While no match for the U.S. Seventh Fleet, the Pacific Fleet presents a formidable force that can protect our northern flank. When it is added into the equation, our chances of success rise to over ninety-five percent.”

“I believe that the Russian participation is crucial,” agreed Sun Yang. “Winning the battle for Taiwan is not the same as winning the war. Even if we capture Taiwan, we are in danger of being blockaded

by the Americans. While we have built up significant strategic reserves of oil and other materials, on our own we will not be able to withstand a naval blockade for more than six months. But with Russia, we control much of Eurasia and have the resources, military and economic capabilities to prevail.”

“But what makes you think that the Russians will do this?” asked Kai Liu. “The Russian President Mosin is careful. He allied with us in a financial attack against the U.S., but a military action is a different matter.”

“Well, they are a junior partner in our alliance. They depend on us for the bulk of their energy sales,” pointed out Cao.

“Yes, and we depend on them. They might be a junior partner, but I’ve seen nothing in Mosin’s behavior to convince me that he will go along with this plan.” Kai Liu shook his head.

“If I may, Comrade General Secretary,” Guo Zheng interjected calmly. “Your doubts about Mosin are well grounded. But we have been working on them and have reasons to believe that a more China-friendly attitude will emerge in a not-too-distant future.”

“And what reasons these might be?” Kai Liu leaned forward, his eyes focused on Guo Zheng.

“At this moment, the reasons are not sufficiently specific. I think we’ll just need a bit more time to properly quantify them,” came back a careful response.

“Fine.” Kai Liu sat straight and drummed his fingers on the table. “There is no question that we have to take action, and soon. The Taiwan option could solve some of the economic issues while rekindling the nationalistic spirit. Our beating heart is nationalistic and capturing Taiwan will raise the country’s spirit and reinforce the Party’s greatness. But we can’t risk defeat and without Russian military and economic alliance the risks are not acceptable. Get me their agreement and I’ll authorize moving forward.”

*Los Angeles, USA*

“Will she or won’t she?”

“Who? What?” David looked at Oleg.

“Jennifer Kron, who else? Will she meet with us?”

“Oh.” David went back to his computer screen.

Oleg shook his head, turned to Alejandro. “Come on, let’s go somewhere! We’ve been here for over a month and spent pretty much all of our time here, in this house, in this room.”

“Oleg, Alejandro is worried about our safety,” said Maggie.

“Yeah, I know, but it’s already dark outside. I’ll even wear a mask if needed.”

Alejandro laughed. “You, my friend, are having cabin fever. And it’s not true that I kept you here locked up. We’ve gone places a few times. Just have to be careful. You, my friends, are fugitives.”

“You promised to show us your warehouse,” said Oleg.

Alejandro shook his head. “You are restless. OK, fine, let’s go. Remember the precautions to take.”

He laughed again as Maggie and Oleg jumped up. David, on the other hand, did not move.

“David, are you coming?” asked Maggie.

“No. Still working on some of the stuff that Brobak sent. Have to have it ready for the meeting with Jennifer.”

“Haven’t even met her and already on first name basis? But I’m glad you think she’ll come.”

He just looked back at Maggie and she nodded. *Yes, have to believe in something.*

There was a new car in the garage. Alejandro proudly patted it.

“Lexus 570A. ‘A’ stands for autonomous. This baby drives itself everywhere, not just on freeways.”

Oleg hemmed. He did not like self-driving cars.

“Come on, Oleg, get into the driver’s seat.”

But Oleg demonstratively went into the back seat.

Alejandro opened the garage door, carefully pronounced the address, and the car gently eased into the street. It was starting to rain outside, a rarity for LA.

The car took them north through stop-and-go traffic, under the Santa Monica Freeway. Signs and billboards switched from English to Spanish and Korean. Streets were full of people, dark-skinned Mexicans, mini-skirted Korean girls, gawking Anglos. Umbrellas came out in the falling rain. Beggars of various nationalities occupied street corners. Neon lights gave the place a *Blade Runner*-ish feel.

“Koreatown is doing well,” explained Alejandro. “They should probably rename it into Mexican-Korean-town.”

“Why is that?” asked Oleg from the back seat.

“Why is what? It doing well or it should be renamed?”

“Both.”

“Despite the name, there are more Mexicans than Koreans living here now. Many urban areas, especially ethnic ones, made it through the crisis OK. People here live closely together. They could fall on family and neighborhood support when needed. And there is a subway station is nearby, so transportation is relatively cheap. Suburbs have been faring much worse. Well, here we are.”

The car parallel-parked itself next to a nondescript one-story building on the edge of downtown. “New American Apparel Warehouse” read the sign.

“Are you in the apparel business too?” asked Maggie.

“Sort of.”

A security guard let them inside and turned on the lights. They walked by rows of pants, shirts and dresses when Alejandro parted two racks of suits and stopped in front of a collection of jeans. He picked a pair, rubbed the material between his thumb and index fingers.

“Try it. Does it feel different?”

“Feels a bit sandy?” offered Maggie.

“Hmm... sandy... interesting. The material has a thin film of graphene inside.”

“Gra-what?” asked Oleg.

“Graphene. It shields people from terahertz imaging. You know, the machines they have in the airports that look through your clothing? Now police have cameras with terahertz imaging. Some folks don’t like that. That’s our clothing market.”

“So you help people to hide guns from the police?”

“I’d like to think we are defending their right to privacy.

Sometimes they have something to hide, but in most cases they just don’t want cops seeing through their clothing. Technology empowers the government. We bring in technology that empowers the people.”

“Is it expensive?”

“It’s not cheap. It’s not illegal to wear, but it’s illegal to make, which keeps prices high. Good markup for us.” Alejandro smiled. “I am a private person. Most of my wardrobe has graphene in it.”

He came to what looked like a corrugated metal wall, touched his palm against it and the wall opened. There was another, smaller warehouse inside, with rows of shelves.

Alejandro walked amongst them, commenting in each section.

“Spectrum analyzers—sweep and monitor transmissions in your home—raise the alarm for anything suspicious. Image distortion devices—they detect the presence of cameras and send a pulse of light back at them. Robots, modified to not send out any private information. Jailbroken watches and phones that can be turned off completely and not disclose your location. TVs and computers configured for privacy. Microwave ovens. Printers...”

“Microwave ovens?” interrupted Oleg.

Alejandro laughed. “They shield your home from cameras, make it invisible. Just kidding! Not everything here is privacy or security oriented. Some of our customers don’t want to use credit cards or order things online where their transactions are traced. They don’t have to. They place orders through us using D-coin wallets on their phones or computers. Many large retailers under government’s pressure don’t accept D-coin, so we convert cryptocurrency into dollars, get their stuff, our gardener crews deliver. We buy things in bulk so we make a bit of margin but not much. Mostly, it’s a part of the package. We want to be a one-stop ‘drop out’ shop where our customers get most of the convenience of regular commerce but in privacy.”

He stopped. “Look, I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Alejandro took them to Guelaguetza, an orange-painted Mexican restaurant in the middle of Koreatown.

“After two years in Mexico, you’ll appreciate this. The best Oaxacan restaurant in LA. Probably in the country!” promised Alejandro. “You must try their enmoladas and chilaquiles. And let’s get some grilled cactus and sautéed grasshoppers.”

A jazz band was going full throttle on a small stage. Alejandro ordered four different versions of mescal, Oaxaca’s agave liquor, for them to try. His hand was firmly planted on Maggie’s jean-covered leg, working its way to her inner thigh.

Alejandro stood up and unsteadily started making his way to the restroom.

“It’s a good thing his is a self-driving car,” said Maggie.

“Ugh.”

Maggie looked at Oleg. He was studying the ground under the table.

“Oleg, what’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” he slowly repeated. “David is what’s the matter! He might be blind because he’s got his nose in the numbers, but I am not.”

Oleg looked at her, breathing heavily, nose crinkled, lips pressed together with corners facing down.

Maggie leaned back in her chair, looking at the hands in her lap, not saying anything. Then she looked up, enunciated carefully, “You must understand, I will do anything to protect David. Anything.”

Oleg sat there staring at her, his mouth relaxed, eyes sad.

“Hey, what’s the matter, why so serious?” Alejandro stumbled back to the table.

“Nothing.” Oleg avoided Alejandro’s eyes.

A waiter brought in an electronic payment tablet. Without checking, Alejandro waved his phone over it. The tablet beeped twice.

“I am sorry, sir, we don’t accept D-coin,” apologized the waiter.

“Agrrrh.” Alejandro angrily punched an index finger against the phone, waved the device again. This time the tablet played a short

happy tune. “It’s about time your restaurant got on with the program and saved me half a percent in conversion fees.”

*New York, USA*

“I don’t have to tell you how unpredictable and dangerous the situation has become,” said a man standing by the window. He looked like a nicely aged movie star: silvery, carefully brushed hair, well-toned figure sheathed in a casually expensive suit, open collar blue shirt, polished fingernails. He would have looked early fifties but the stretched skin of his face, evidence of plastic surgery, gave away that he was likely quite a bit older. “With all the money we poured into him, Tice is now a distant third.”

“Yeah, well, weren’t you, Jim, the one telling us eight months ago that if we increase our contributions, Tice was a shoo-in?” retorted a tall elderly man in jeans and cowboy boots. “In the last budget we got Congress to agree to increase the individual contribution limit to two million. There are six of us in this room and, I reckon, between direct and indirect contributions we must have poured close to fifty million into your guy. Or should I say ‘your loser?’”

“Be careful how you talk to me, Bryce, you’re not in Texas anymore.” Jim the ‘movie star’ bared his teeth.

“Calm down, you two!” A red-faced, heavy-breathing man with two chins slapped his hand against the table. “The six of us have a net worth of over two hundred billion; let’s not squabble over a few pennies. The question is, what are we going to do now?”

“Yes, this is the question.” A slightly static-y voice came from a holographic 3-D image of a younger man in the corner. “Sorry I couldn’t be there with you in person, but my hedge fund activities required my physical presence in London.”

“My hedge fund activities, oh boy,” mimicked him a swarthy man in a pinstriped suit. “But you’re not the only one; Sheila here is also present electronically.” He pointed to a second holographic figure in the room, that of a thin blonde in her late forties.

“Well, you’ll have to excuse me, gentlemen,” Sheila drawled in a Southern accent. “I would have rather been there with you in person but that boring business, you know...”

“Let’s skip the pleasantries,” interrupted her the heavy breather. “The point is, Tice is not going to win this election. It’s Dimon or Kron. And we have two hundred billion dollars to protect.”

“We can’t let Kron win!” shouted the cowboy. “Didn’t you see his interview? He is a Goddamn commie!”

“I am not crazy about Kron, but Dimon scares the crap out of me,” drawled Sheila. “He talks like he’s ready to start a war with the Chinese and the Russians. Now, the war might be good for you, George, with your defense companies”—the figure pointed to the heavy breather—“but for many of us this is not a good business.”

“We can control Dimon,” said George. “I know his demagoguery is over the top at times, but that’s what it takes to get the sheep to follow. If we support him and get him to the top, he’ll work with us. Once he wins, he’ll tone down his rhetoric.”

“And you think we can’t control Kron?” asked the hedge-fund hologram. “I read his election pamphlets. Some things he proposes make sense to me.”

“I don’t think so.” The ‘movie star’ shook his head. “Dimon is an opportunist, Kron an idealist. I know how to manage the former but not the latter. And frankly, I think that we, the people that know how to make real money, know better how to run the country than some wild-eyed idealist. Most people just want to be happy, fed and entertained; they don’t care about all the complex stuff that goes into running the country.”

“Yeah, I would agree with that.” Bryce the cowboy nodded. “Dimon is a politician, while Kron... hell knows what Kron is...”

“I don’t know,” the pinstriped man wondered. “Dimon just seems to be so far out there...”

“It’s an act,” replied George. “I figure we can manage him; he’ll need us. But does anyone here think we can control Kron? Sheila, you’re scared of Dimon, but do you think that Kron will play along with us? Or will he try to take away our money?”

“I don’t think Kron will play along,” sighed Sheila’s image. “It’s just that Dimon is so, how to put it, unpredictable. But if you all think we can manage him, OK.”

“And what about you, hedge boy?” George turned to the other hologram.

“Don’t call me that! I’m like Sheila—uneasy about Dimon, but I figure it’s rather Dimon than Kron.”

“Of course you’re like Sheila.” Bryce bared his teeth.

“Enough of this sparring.” Jim the ‘movie star’ waved. “Is anybody here thinking that we should back Kron?”

He was greeted by silence.

“OK, Dimon it is. I’ll pledge ten million. You all in?”

Nods.

“Can’t we be more direct in our support?” asked Bryce. “We have millions of people working for us; can we push them to vote the right way?”

Jim disagreed. “No, we have to be careful. We have to maintain the public’s belief in the process. Appearances matter. I’ll get in touch with Dimon and offer our support. We’ll make sure he knows who his friends are.”

**AUGUST 2024**

*St. Petersburg, Russia*

Vitaly Mershov did not frighten easily, but he was scared for the past few days, ever since Slava and Petr, the two fellow *militziya* investigators, had been gunned down. The official story was that they were caught in a mob shootout. It just didn't sound like them. Both had been known as careful and cautious. Slava used to say "I have a nose for bad situations and I avoid them like a plague; better to be cowardly and alive than brave and dead." Vitaly wondered whether this had anything to do with them being on the scene of the murder of the Defense Minister Nedinsky. Had they talked to the wrong people? After their lunch in a beer bar near Kutuzov Embankment, Vitaly tried to run a check on Bogdan Zaychikov, but the file was classified. Did Slava or Petr tell anyone that they shared the information with Vitaly?

Not willing to give in to his anxiety, he started checking e-mail that accumulated over the past few days. Most of it was advertising junk, so he kept hitting "delete," "delete." Suddenly his brain registered that something was not quite right with the subject of the message he just deleted. Vitaly retrieved the message from the trash. The message was titled: "*Please donate to Shlisselburg's Museum of Breaking the Leningrad Blockade.*"

Oleg Khmelco, his lost childhood friend. Oleg went to the United States some time ago. Back in 2022, Oleg disappeared without a trace, probably got involved in the underworld and paid for it. But they had an agreement: if one of them had to contact the other in secret, they were to refer to the Shlisselburg's Museum, the place that Vitaly's grandfather made them go to every year on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the anniversary of the German attack on Russia.

Vitaly looked at the message itself. The "From" field was not familiar and most likely meaningless. The text seemed like a typical, if somewhat long, request for money to be sent to a post-office box. Vitaly got up, went to the bookshelf and retrieved *The Three Musketeers*

by Alexander Dumas. The post-office box number was a guide to the place in the book to use as a one-time decoding pad.

It was a slow, manual process. The secret message within the solicitation directed Vitaly to an online data storage account, with a password and two words: "Be careful." So Oleg was alive after all. And definitely involved in something dangerous.

*Great, just what I need on top of Nedinsky's murder,* thought Mershov. He got up to leave, to go to one of the libraries and check the online data storage account from there.

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jennifer dressed in khaki slacks, dark-blue sneakers, a green shirt, dark glasses and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Exactly what she wore a week ago when she went to the nursery on Venice Boulevard. Occasional gardening was the only luxury she allowed herself these days. *Exactly what the note said to do. They must have been watching me.*

Jeff was working from home. She kissed him with “Going to a nursery,” got into their old small hybrid SUV and drove off. After heading north, she turned east on Venice and stayed in the right lane. About ten blocks before the nursery, she saw the Villa’s Tacos restaurant on her right. She pulled into the driveway, made her way to the back, and parked the car. *Why am I doing this? Because some stranger told me that he saw my father a few days before his death and that he had some important information? This could be a trap. Still, after eighteen years, why would anyone use my father’s name?*

Jennifer took a deep breath, got out of the car without locking it and knocked on the door of a restroom just outside the restaurant. The door unlocked, she carefully walked in and came face-to-face with herself. Or almost herself: the woman standing across from her was of similar height and weight and dressed identically.

The woman extended her hand. “The keys?”

Jennifer handed over the car keys. The woman looked at her watch and said, “You are being followed. After I come out, another woman will come in and lock the door. Don’t come out until it’s safe. I will continue to the nursery and pick out a few small plants. They’ll bring you there.”

With that, the woman slipped out the door. A noisy woman in a black shawl got in. She continued muttering in Spanish while motioning Jennifer to be quiet, wrapped the black shawl around Jennifer, then looked at her phone.

“OK, dear, the car that’s been following you is chasing after Isabella now.” After seeing Jennifer’s uncomprehending look, she said, “That’s the name of the girl that was made to look like you. Go into the restaurant through the back door.”

As Jennifer walked into a dark restaurant, a waiter silently pointed to an alcove in the back. Three people waited for her there: Oleg, another man, and a woman. The other man looked to be in his late thirties or early forties, tall but stooped, tired face. The woman was younger, long blond hair, with a slightly Slavic face like Oleg's. There was no food on the table, only four glasses of water.

"Jennifer, thank you for coming..." started Oleg.

"Who are you?" demanded Jennifer, ready to walk out.

"Yes, you're right." Oleg nodded. "We don't have a lot of time so let's get to it. Jennifer Rostin, please meet David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin."

"Are you..." Jennifer stammered, spilling water from her glass.

"Yes, we are," replied the woman.

"But you're fugitives... everybody thinks you're somewhere in South America..."

"We probably should be," agreed Maggie. "But there is something extremely important that made us risk coming back here."

"And you." Jennifer turned to Oleg. "What is your role and what does it have to do with my father?"

"Oleg has been our friend and protector since we became involved with the Schulmann file." David broke his silence. "We wanted to meet you because the information we have is important to you and your husband."

"I have met your father," Oleg confirmed. "As I told you, it was June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006. We were with the Mershov family: Konstantin, his son Ivan, and his grandson Vitaly."

"Mershov?" Jennifer gasped.

"Yes, you know the name?"

"It was in my grandfather's diary. Ivan Mershov was the *militzia* officer my grandfather worked for during the Leningrad blockade."

"It must have been Konstantin's father," Oleg thought out loud. "Konstantin was the one who asked to go to the Piskariovskoye Cemetery to see your grandfather's grave."

Jennifer took a drink of water, tried to compose herself.

“Both my father and my grandfather died investigating something back in Russia. I don’t believe for a second that my father killed himself, but I was never able to find out who did it or why.”

Oleg looked at his watch. “I don’t know whether this is an accidental coincidence or not. But we have to get Jennifer to the nursery in the next fifteen minutes.”

Maggie reached across the table and took Jennifer’s hands into hers.

“Jennifer, back in 2022 we published parts of the Schulmann research. Now, David broke more of the data in the file and new names came up. One of them is John Dimon, your husband’s opponent in the race.”

Jennifer recoiled. “Even if true, it would be difficult to prove given what happened since... since your exposure. And I’m not sure what I can do with this. The wife of his opponent throwing out unproven allegations? That would probably only help him.”

“Please, call me Maggie. We thought that perhaps your grandfather could take this information to the president. Besides being one of the crisis’s profiteers, Dimon might be getting illegal financing from abroad.”

“My grandfather is eighty-five. He retired from politics two years ago in disgust. He would never go back to Washington.”

Maggie squeezed Jennifer’s hands.

“Jennifer, one of the driving figures behind the 2019 crisis was GRU General Nikolai Nemzhov. He knew who profited and was using the information for blackmail. He disappeared in 2022, probably with billions of dollars. Nemzhov might be in a position to blackmail Dimon. It’s not only about the race. Please think of the implications. That’s why David and I risked everything to come back. Otherwise, Jonathan Schulmann and Suzy Yamamoto died in vain.”

“Yamamoto?”

“Yes, why?”

“At my father’s funeral, I was approached by two people that worked with him during his last days. Their names were Jack Mikulski and Suzy Yamamoto.”

“Suzy Yamamoto is the one who saved the Schulmann file that we found. She died four years ago,” said David. “She worked on Wall Street around 2006. It is probably the same person.”

Jennifer swallowed hard.

“I don’t know if this is just a coincidence. My father didn’t believe in coincidences. Can you provide proof of Dimon’s involvement?”

“Yes!” David slammed his fist on the table. “Bank accounts, dates, amounts—I can get it to you.”

“You put it together, David.” Oleg got up. “I’ll get this information to Jennifer. But we must go to the nursery now. She’s being followed and we have to carefully make a switch.”

*Moscow, Russia*

“President Mosin, thank you for seeing me again on such short notice. I would like to follow up on the questions we discussed in the last meeting.”

“Ambassador Sheng, we are still evaluating your questions,” replied Mosin. “I and the Foreign Minister Karpov would like to better understand what’s behind your—how shall I put it?—somewhat extraordinary requests.”

Ambassador Sheng opened his palms in mock surprise.

“Mr. President, what do you find extraordinary about my government’s inquiries? We have a mutual defense pact and expanding global coordination of our military activities is a perfectly natural progress of our alliance. By the same token, giving us a guarantee of increased deliveries of oil and gas is also something we think we should be able to count on from our closest ally and trading partner.”

Mosin shook his head.

“Ambassador, you know perfectly well that sending oil and gas to you means redirecting it from Europe. We have never broken our energy delivery agreements. Between Russia and the Middle East, China is well supplied with oil and gas. Why do you suddenly need such a guarantee? And why the need to expand the military coordination? Ours is a defense pact—are you expecting an attack? Please don’t tell me about some vague ‘eventuality’ that you want to be prepared for.”

“Mr. President, may I remind you of recent history?” Sheng practically spat out his words. “Back in 2015, America tried to choke you: they crashed the price of oil, attacked your currency, imposed damaging sanctions. They blocked the pipelines you were trying to build in Europe. They helped to install the anti-Russian government in Kiev and supplied them with advanced weaponry. NATO’s military bases encircled you. It was our government that came to your aid. In our joint effort to undermine the U.S. dollar in 2019, it was China that provided the majority of the resources. We helped to

restore Russia to the position of power that you are enjoying now. Without us, the Americans would have crushed you!”

“Mr. Ambassador, we are deeply grateful for the support your government has provided in the past,” protested Mosin. “But the kind of measures you are asking us to guarantee, they smell of potential war. We deserve to know the reasons for these requests. That’s what allies do.”

“Mr. President, I gather from your response that you are not ready to discuss expanded military cooperation or energy guarantees in case of emergency?”

“Mr. Ambassador, we have to better understand the reasons for your requests before we can address them,” Mosin spoke slowly and firmly, his eyes narrowed.

“Very well, Mr. President,” replied Sheng, getting up. “I will report your response to my government.”

After Sheng left, Mosin turned to Karpov, who’d been listening quietly.

“Volodya, what do you think?”

“You’ve seen the anti-American demonstrations all across China. They are preparing their people for war. And they want to drag us into it.”

“I don’t know.” Mosin shook his head. “They’ve done massive anti-Japanese, anti-American, even anti-Indian demonstrations in the past and those didn’t lead to war.”

“This one feels different. They have never come to us with such requests before. Remember the discussion that we had with Shelkov last month? I think Beijing’s *Politburo* may believe that now is the best time to strike. America is starting to recover from the 2019 crisis and subsequent political and economic turmoil while China is now struggling with aging demographics and high unemployment.”

Mosin nodded. “You may be right. All the more reason to remain noncommittal.”

*New York, USA*

Robert Treadwell's empire was "multi-platform." He was an expert at hitting people with short, twenty-words-or-less soundbytes designed for the people whose attention span was less than ten seconds—which by now was a significant portion of the population. But *The Treadwell Report* was a weekly spectacle, an hourly show for the fans where The Man himself would show up in their living rooms as a three-dimensional projection and ruthlessly dissect whoever did not please him that week.

The selection of today's victim was not a great surprise. For the past four months, Treadwell was an outspoken supporter of John Dimon and reserved his most biting, sarcastic remarks for Jeff Kron. But the depth of the scorn that Treadwell brought today was shocking even to his followers.

"For the past five years, we've been under relentless attack from our enemies! They have tried to destroy our currency! They have stolen our jobs! Now they are attacking our embassies!"

Behind the host, appeared a video of marchers in Beijing, shouting slogans and throwing air punches against the American embassy.

"What's next? Military bases in Cuba or Mexico? Pointing missiles at our cities from a few miles away? And which of the candidates thinks this is just fine? Which of the candidates tells us to look inside, to blame America? I'll tell you which one!"

A picture of Jeff Kron appeared on the screen, taken in one of his less presentable moments: looking puzzled, blinking behind his old-fashioned glasses. The audience booed on cue.

"It's been well documented that the Chinese and the Russians planned this financial warfare against our country. That they wanted to destroy us, to break us apart! But this hippie, this nobody wants to blame us! If you are in a fight with a schoolyard bully, are you going to fight back like John Dimon is telling us to do? Or are you going to let him pummel you while saying to yourself 'I have to look inside. I have not shared my lunch with the bully, so he's justified in attacking me!' Because that's what Jeff Kron wants you to do. He wants you to

go and blame yourself and kneel before the very enemies that are wishing us harm! And, of course, he has no experience running anything—he's that hippie guru that preaches nonviolence and peaceful resistance and all that crap. When you are under attack, you need a real resistance, not a peaceful one! He says we have no right to monitor people's communication and movement. Well, we have to in order to root out our enemies! And we have to in the name of fairness, to make sure everyone does their fair share and pays taxes. I, for one, trust my government to protect me without questioning everything they do."

Treadwell paused theatrically, looking at Jeff Kron's unflattering image.

"Why do so many people follow this dangerous demagogue? Especially when you have a real American like John Dimon running? Now, I'm not calling for violence here, but whoever takes this character out will do the country a great service!"

"That was some show," said the makeup specialist Norma as she was cleaning Treadwell's face. "You really went after Kron."

"Yeah, it may have been a bit overboard," agreed Treadwell, now calm and composed. "But our ratings are starting to slip and I had to make some waves. Plus, most of my viewers are idiots with an attention span of a gnat. There's a reason they call my show 'news porn.' I have to appeal to their emotions, grab them, scare them. That's the way it works: you choose a few simple points and you keep repeating them over and over until they accept it as a God-given truth. Now they won't even bother listening to what Kron is saying; they'll be thinking how to get rid of him instead."

*Chicago, USA*

John Dimon was in the back seat of a limo, watching TV footage of his earlier rally. He was not happy.

“Get me Bob Johnson!”

“Hello, Mr. Dimon,” Johnson’s voice came on the car audio system.

“Did you see what happened today?”

“Ummm, yes?”

“And this was OK with you?”

“Well, Mr. Dimon, there were some interruptions but...”

“Interruptions? I was being heckled by Kron’s supporters! And I had to stand there with an idiotic smile on my face and take it!”

“Mr. Dimon, these things happen...”

“Well, Bob, I am paying you so these things don’t happen. Not to me. Kron probably sent them there on purpose, to make me look like a fool. Where were your men?”

“We had ten people right there at the rally. If it were one person making noise, they would have escorted him out. But there were dozens, so my men had to let it go as long as the protesters remained nonviolent.”

“Yeah, they were nonviolent, all right! Just screaming their lungs out and waving Kron’s posters. Listen to me, Bob, and listen carefully. Next time I have a rally, I want a lot more than ten people there. And I don’t want anybody with an anti-Dimon poster within five hundred yards from me. And anyone who interrupts me, I want him or her out of there. Bleeding, if needed. Do you understand me?”

Johnson was silent for a long moment.

“Yes, Mr. Dimon.”

“Good. Goodbye.”

Dimon turned to Chris Bugelow, one of his two campaign advisors.

“Can you believe this?”

“Well, John, you can’t let a few hecklers get to you.”

“Chris, I was made to look weak there on the podium. I can’t look weak. That would be the end of my campaign. In these uncertain times, people want a strong leader they can follow.”

“Just be careful. Johnson has these goons he calls on. They come in and beat people up. In Seattle, they’ve put two pro-Kron demonstrators in a hospital. Some of the web blogs talk about intimidation tactics.”

“But they can’t trace it to us?”

“No, so far it looked like clashes between protesters.”

“Don’t worry about it then. I’d rather be feared than disrespected.”

They drove in silence while Dimon poured himself a drink from the bar, gulped it down, took a few deep breaths.

“John, are you ready to look at some commercials now?”

“Yeah, all right.”

Bigelow punched a couple of buttons on the controller and Dimon appeared on the TV screen telling a young couple with a toddler how he will keep them safe. The toddler’s face and the words *John Dimon will defend our children’s future!* filled the screen.

“What do you think, John? A bit simplistic?”

“No, I love it. Short and sweet. Great imagery. Make more like this.”

“We are being accused of not addressing the issues in depth.”

“I don’t care. Most people don’t want to dig deep or listen to what politicians say. Give them images, give them values, give them symbols, invoke their pride. People respond to emotions, not scientific treatises.”

“OK, how about this one?”

An unflattering picture of Jeff Kron came up on the screen, with Robert Treadwell’s voice blasting him for being inexperienced and unpatriotic. Kron’s face faded away and was replaced by Dimon’s, smiling with a calm blue ocean behind him, and a *John Dimon, an American Patriot* caption.

“Hmm.” Dimon rubbed his jaw. “I’d say Treadwell went over the top in his last diatribe against Kron. Too much, might backfire. How are we doing against Kron?”

“The latest poll is still pretty much the same, thirty-two percent for you, twenty-seven for him.”

“We just can’t seem to pull away.” Dimon stared out the window, then turned back to Bigelow:

“What is our likely voters’ breakdown?”

“We are doing well with men and with the lower income group. Your promise to increase government assistance helped there. But it hurt you in the middle income category, which is now leaning to Kron. They are afraid of tax increases. The middle class is much smaller than it was, but still about a third of all voters.”

“Don’t air this commercial yet. Where is Kron now?”

“Probably in LA, as usual. He doesn’t travel much.”

“No, not LA. Where is he going to be?”

Bigelow checked his phone.

“He’ll be in Phoenix in a couple of days.”

“Let’s go to Phoenix then.”

“But... but we have to be in Atlanta...”

“Reschedule.”

“But why?”

Dimon resumed looking out the window.

*Beijing, China*

Usually meetings of senior planners of the PLA General Staff's Logistics department were conducted by its Director, General Tong Liao. But today it was General Wu Cao who sat at the head of the table, while General Liao took a seat to the right of his superior.

General Cao outlined his requirements and concluded with, "Remember, the preparations must be conducted in utmost secrecy. You can't discuss this plan with your subordinates except for what they absolutely must know. Any questions?"

"General Cao, I wanted to make sure that the planned timing is for the second half of January. In previous exercises, we avoided winter months because of the weather," said Colonel Jia Kecheng.

"Yes, Colonel, that's the timing. I understand it presents extra challenges, but it will also add to the element of surprise. Especially since there will be a power transition within the U.S. administration at that time."

"And we should assume that the Russian Pacific Fleet will be a part of the attack force?" asked General Liao.

"Yes, why do I have to repeat myself?"

"I apologize, General Cao. It's just that we've never made this assumption before because we did not think that Mosin would agree to this."

Wu Cao patted Liao's arm.

"I understand. I apologize for my irritation. You'll see before the end of the month. Assume that not only will Russia help us militarily, but they will also divert all their energy deliveries from Europe to China, so you don't have to worry about the Americans cutting us off from the Middle East oil. Thank you in advance for your efforts; I would like weekly reports on the progress," said Cao as he was getting up to leave.

*Phoenix, USA*

“Why does he want to meet with you?” Robert Marosyan turned from the front passenger seat to ask.

Jeff shrugged.

“I don’t know. Probably noticed that we are in the same city and thought—”

“No,” interrupted Jennifer. “I checked and it is an unplanned stop for Dimon.”

“But didn’t he have a meeting scheduled in some factory?”

“Jennifer is right.” Marosyan shook his head. “I checked, and Dimon’s visit seems to be a last minute thing. He is doing a traditional ‘meet-and-greet, press the flesh’ campaign and travels quite extensively. You, on the other hand, mostly sit in LA and do virtual town halls. I barely managed to get you out on this three-cities tour. I think Dimon came to Phoenix in order to meet with you. The question is—why?”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” answered Jennifer.

The driver-less car pulled to the entrance of the Scottsdale Fairmont Princess. Robert came outside, stretched, leisurely sauntered into the lobby, and admired the stone flooring.

“Come on, Robert!” Jeff hurried him. “We’re already late.”

“Jeff, slow down,” retorted Robert. “The bastard wants something from you. Make him wait.”

They slowly made their way to the suite and knocked.

Dimon himself opened the door, smiling broadly as if his favorite relatives just showed up.

“Jeff, it’s great to finally meet you in person! And your lovely wife, of course. And you must be Robert; heard so much about you. Please, come in, come in!”

Two other people in the suite introduced themselves as Jonathan Morton and Christopher Bugelow, Dimon’s campaign advisors. After Morton poured drinks and exchanging pleasantries, Jeff cleared his throat and asked,

“So, John, what do you want to discuss?”

Dimon seemed to be taken aback for a second by being denied the opportunity to work his charm a bit longer, but quickly recovered.

“Yes, of course. You’re a busy man, Jeff; your time is valuable. Can we make this a private, one-on-one conversation?”

“No. Jennifer is my partner in everything and Robert is a treasured advisor. I have no secrets from them.”

“Very admirable.” Dimon laughed, but his eyes were hard. He was used to others submitting to his requests.

“Let’s get to the point then. Jeff, you are not going to win this election...”

“Jeff is only five points behind you in the polls,” snarled Marosyan. “That’s within the margin of error and we still have three months to go.”

“But you don’t have the organization, and you don’t have the money—that will become more and more of a problem.” Dimon ignored Marosyan and continued to stare at Kron.

Marosyan wouldn’t be denied easily. “And without that we are still very much within a striking distance, and Jeff’s virtual town halls are proving to be more and more effective.”

“John, please get to the point. We all know the numbers, we know where we stand. Why did you ask me here?” After his initial unease, Kron looked more confident. He leaned back in a lounge chair and pinned Dimon with a calm stare.

“Yes, sure.” Dimon showed his perfect white teeth. “Despite Robert’s enthusiasm, you are not likely to win. But I would like to offer you a way to get to the White House.”

Dimon paused for effect and then delivered the punch line:

“Join me as my vice president!”

Dimon spread his arms as if to embrace Kron with this generous offer.

Jeff looked unimpressed.

“But we both already designated our VP choices.”

Dimon waved off the objection.

“Mine is a moron that was pushed on me; yours is a nobody.”

Jeff remained silent, studying Dimon who shifted uncomfortably and launched into a speech.

“Jeff, just think of it: together, we are unbeatable! The moment we make an announcement, they can cancel the damn election. Instead of a chance at a highly improbable win, you get a guaranteed VP position. And in eight years, after I am done, you are the frontrunner for the presidency. You’ll be only fifty then, right?”

“But we disagree on so many things.” Jeff shook his head.

“Come on, Jeff.” Dimon twisted his face into an ‘is that a big deal?’ expression. “We’re not that far apart; with the proper spin people will think we were always in agreement on many issues. We appeal to our target demographics, we do and say whatever needs to be said in order to get elected...”

“Jeff does not!” Jennifer interrupted.

“OK, OK, your husband is a saint. But, Jeff, ask yourself: in just a few weeks, do you want to be a saint without a job, without influence? Or do you want to be in a position to make a difference? Pick the areas you want and I’ll give you a free hand there! Do you want education? Healthcare? Take them! I promise I’ll stay away.”

Ignoring everyone else in the room, Dimon sat next to Kron leaned forward and loudly whispered, “Just think of the power you will wield and all the good you can do with it. The lifestyle you will have. And the promise of a future presidency. All here, guaranteed, in the palm of your hand.”

“Why are you offering this?” asked Jennifer.

Dimon slowly turned to her, as if remembering that there were others in the room.

“I believe I will win the presidency with or without your husband. It’s not just my advantage in the polls, it’s also where my followers are and how they map to electoral votes. But I don’t want to take chances. As I said, together your husband and I are unbeatable. It’s a win-win situation.”

“When do you need the answer?”

Dimon shrugged, showing that there was really nothing to think about.

“It’s already August, so, soon. We are in the same city; we could make the announcement today.”

“Please give us a few minutes.” Jeff got up. “We’ll go take a walk.”

In silence, Jennifer, Robert, and Jeff walked through the grounds until they found a quiet place to sit by a small stream.

“Well, that was interesting.” Jennifer broke the silence. “Robert, were you surprised?”

“I must admit I was.” Marosyan nodded. “There is a certain logic to it.”

“So you think his proposal is worth taking?”

“Tough question.” Marosyan exhaled. “Lord knows I don’t like the guy. Dimon is a cheap populist. But it’s true that Jeff’s chances of winning are not very high. Becoming VP positions Jeff for the future while giving him a chance to do some of the things he wants to do now. On the balance, I would consider accepting the proposal.”

“What about you, Jen?”

“There are some advantages to this,” said Jennifer. “Jeff, you are behind in every poll. The Dimon – Kron ticket is sure to win. A bird in hand... You can start making an impact and in eight years you’ll be the frontrunner.”

Both Robert and Jennifer looked at Jeff expectantly. Jeff followed the stream with his eyes, then looked to the horizon, lost in thought. Finally, he shook his head.

“No. Everything you said makes sense. But I never wanted to be a politician. I am running because I believe we must make radical changes. To ally myself with this man, the man that stands for so many things I despise will betray not just myself, but also all those that worked so hard on my behalf. I would become just another run-of-the-mill politician. And I will be eaten alive by those more skilled in the game than I am. There will be no reforms, no presidential runs. By the next election I’ll be a nobody and he’ll get rid of me.”

After Jeff delivered his answer and left, Dimon made a call.

“He refused. No, there is no chance of him changing his mind. I don’t want to know what you’re planning to do.”

*Los Angeles, CA*

The meeting took place in a private house in Torrance, a town on the southern end of sprawling Los Angeles. Not willing to take the chance of David or Maggie or Oleg being recognized thanks to one of the millions of surveillance cameras, one of Alejandro's men drove them late at night. David Weinstein arrived even later: he was given a different address, picked up there and went through two car changes before being brought in.

Oleg was not happy about them parking in the driveway rather than the garage. The reason became clear when their host Nick, a gawky, bespectacled, disheveled, wispy-bearded young man in his twenties, showed them that the garage was occupied with all manner of aerial drones.

"This is an observation platform," Nick explained excitedly pointing to a large, octopus-looking thing with eight rotors and what seemed like a dozen pairs of eyes. "We hover it at just under four hundred feet so the FAA does not bother us. Each platform feeds twenty-four monitors."

"And what are you monitoring?" asked Maggie.

"Mostly the neighborhood. Each unit has sixteen hi-res cameras on its belly pointing down. We can zoom in on each individual flower in a neighbor's garden. The other eight cameras are on top, looking out. At the normal cruising altitude we can recognize any approaching drone at up to fifteen miles."

"And what are these?" Maggie pointed at smaller units with six rotors.

"Ah, these are our interceptors!" Nick beamed with pride. "We modified them ourselves. Each can autonomously track a target within five hundred feet and carries two metallic mesh nets that it can launch at hostile drones from up to forty feet. If the net snares the propeller or rotor, it'll bring the drone down. We transmit them the target's image and guide them into the vicinity, then they operate on their own."

"I see you have some fixed-wing drones too." David's eyes sparkled with interest.

“Oh yes, we use those for tracking and for imaging. We also configured some of them to drop explosives. But this is primarily research,” Nick hastened to add. “We use drones for observation and self-defense.”

“Who are ‘we?’” asked Oleg.

“The neighborhood. We provide a service. People here have a ‘neighborhood watch’ that we are tied into. Local-on-local crime practically disappeared. Sometimes, we supply information to the police. Sometimes, it’s against the police.”

“What do you mean?”

“People don’t always trust the police. This way, we can provide them with our record of what happened when they were stopped, how fast they were going, and more. The government has the power of technology, we give the same power to the people.”

“Are you launching them from here?”

“Oh no.” Nick laughed. “This is where we tinker with them. We have two launch facilities that we control remotely. This is the backup control center. Come, let me show you.”

Nick led them inside the house to a large windowless room. Rows of monitors lined two of the walls, with four work desks in front. Another bearded young man with a shaved head was looking at the monitors along one wall, with black-and-white images. The man looked at the intruders, annoyed, and turned back.

“These are night vision images,” said Nick. “If we see something suspicious, we send one of our mini-drones to illuminate and focus on the scene. As you can see, we use older monitors—they do the job and are much cheaper.”

Oleg and David looked bewitched, their eyes glowing with interest. But the noise of a new arrival forced them to almost reluctantly end the tour.

David Weinstein was brimming with enthusiasm.

“It’s so great to meet you, David and Maggie! May I call you by first names?”

Maggie nodded, smiling.

“And you, Oleg! Jennifer told me that you met her father in St. Petersburg in June of 2006. You know, I met him in Moscow just a

few days earlier. I was only nine, but I remember him well. He stayed in our apartment. You see, my grandfather was his professor in college and my mother was his friend.”

“It’s great to meet you, David.” Oleg grinned. “But as it’s past nine o’clock, I think we should make sure to take care of business.”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Weinstein. “Jennifer trusted me to have this meeting.”

After the four of them sat around a small kitchen table, Ferguson pushed a folder to Weinstein.

“You will find here the summary of our findings related to John Dimon, plus the drive with the detailed data. In analyzing the Schulmann research, I came across a number of companies that did very well in 2019 and that were indirectly linked to Dimon.”

“Indirectly?”

“Yes. But the sheer numbers defied a realistic possibility of this just being a statistically random occurrence.”

“Even so, this is not likely to do anything. I mean, the two of you”—Weinstein pointed at Maggie and David—“made this incredible disclosure two years ago and yet most people you identified, sometimes even directly, got off scot-free.”

“In Dimon’s case, there’s another problem: many transactions ended up at the SOFI.”

“So it’s possible that Dimon was working with someone abroad,” Weinstein thought out loud.

“We didn’t have enough to go on,” explained David. “Schulmann’s data only went to early 2020. Fortunately, a very courageous person with proper security access was able to get us more data. You will see in the file we’ve given you that the connection continued to be strong. Moreover, when the data is limited to the transactions that terminated at the SOFI’s gateways through the current year, there are only two results that are statistically significant. One is John Dimon. The other is FreedomShield.”

“You mean this is not limited to the 2019 crisis?”

“No, not at all. If anything, the correlation over the past eighteen months has only grown stronger. And over ninety-nine percent of

the executions were deposits, coming from the SOFI and going into accounts here.”

Weinstein stared at Ferguson.

“Do you understand what you are implying? Especially if none of these accounts bear Dimon’s name?”

“David, you now have the numbers. Analyze them. At some point, even indirect connections become too strong to ignore.”

“Have you been able to see the transactions within the SOFI?” asked Weinstein in a hoarse voice.

“No, we don’t have the access. Can you?”

“No, I can’t either. Very few people do.” Weinstein shook his head.

Oleg got up.

“Is there anything else that we can do right now?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll go over the file,” replied Weinstein. “What do I do if I have questions?”

“We’ll run another Craigslist ad for a beige sofa. Reply asking if we have one in green.”

*Beijing, China*

Jia Kecheng woke up with a start. The same nightmare.

*June 4, 1989. He was a nineteen-year old soldier from the provinces. Their unit had been sent to Tiananmen Square to fight vicious rioters that occupied the area and killed one of the soldiers. At least, that's what they were told. They gathered inside the Great Hall of the People and waited for their orders. The doors swung open and Jia found himself outside, gripping his gun with sweating hands. "We have permission to shoot," a voice came from his right.*

*Jia's unit started advancing towards the center of the square, to the Monument to the People's Heroes. A brick flew through the air and hit the soldier next to him... then another brick... and another one... To this day, Jia did not know who started shooting. But once the first shot rang out, it was like a dam broke — everyone around him started to fire. Jia was not aiming, but he pressed the trigger and a young man twenty meters away, probably no more than seventeen, grabbed his chest and crumbled, a red spot spreading on a white shirt. Jia stopped in horror. One of his unit's leaders shouted in Jia's ear: Keep moving! Jia walked forward as if in his sleep.*

*He did not fire his gun again that day. He just watched in a trance how the square turned into a war zone. Smoke rose from burned out vehicles and from the burning possessions left behind by the protesters, black, acrid smoke. Jia kept looking for the man he thought he shot, but could not see him in the smoke of the pyres that engulfed the square.*

But he has seen the man many times since—in a recurrent nightmare. In his dream, Jia tries to not squeeze the trigger but his fingers are controlled by someone else, the gun spits fire, the red flower blooms again... and again... and again.

Jia was not in Tiananmen thirty-three years later, in 2022. But he did see the clips of the massacre. No matter how much the government tried to stop the information, block the websites, filter out offending clips using their fingerprint signature, the videos kept

escaping censorship. Jia looked in horror because this was even worse than 1989: in 2022, the government did not rely on inexperienced soldiers from provinces. They sent well-trained, loyal killers. The protesters had been mercilessly mowed down. And now the government was expertly turning the anger outwards, towards the Americans. And he knew why. Jia, after all, worked in the People's Liberation Army General Staff. They were about to unleash the Tiananmen's madness on the rest of the world.

## *Moscow, Russia*

The six-story building on Bolshoy Kislovsky Lane housed mostly high-placed government officials and well-connected Muskovites. Being only a ten-minute walk from the Kremlin, it met the basic requirement of getting to the seat of power quickly. It became even more desirable since Colonel Ivan Mershov moved into a flat on the fourth floor of the building. The Colonel himself was a quiet, unassuming polite man that did not ask for—nor offer—any favors to his neighbors. But the Colonel headed the SOBR, the Special Rapid Response Unit of the Russian Interior Ministry. That made the building and its surroundings one of the safest areas in Moscow. Round the clock, a UAZ Patriot—a form of a Russian Jeep—was parked in front, with two *spetsnaz* men inside. The building's inhabitants felt very safe.

This evening, Colonel Mershov had a visitor. In Russian tradition, they were sitting in the kitchen even after dinner.

“Now that your mother went to bed, Vitaly—what brings you here? You didn't take a week off to come to Moscow without reason,” asked senior Mershov.

“You don't think I'd just come visit you and Mom?”

“Not for a week. Being young and single, you should be going to a resort, not your parents. What's going on?”

“I have a sense something is going on, but I am not sure what. It started with the assassination of the Defense Minister Nedinsky...”

“You are not supposed to be investigating this; it's in the FSB's and military police's hands now!”

“I am not investigating, Dad. It just so happened that two of my *militzia* colleagues were in the area and came to the scene before the FSB showed up. They told me things didn't look right. Slava Prudkov was a sniper in the army before and he did not think the story of Nedinsky being killed with a high-powered rifle through a bullet-resistant glass matched what he saw.”

“Well, I doubt he is an expert to evaluate such things.” Ivan waved off the argument.

“Well, there were a few other questions. Like the minister’s car taking an unusual route. Like the observation drone that conveniently broke down a few minutes before the attack. Like the fact that the FSB was on the scene very quickly, as if they expected something to happen.”

Ivan Mershov chewed his lip.

“Vitaly, I know you are a good investigator and you must have an instinct telling you something’s not right. But what you told me, is simply not enough. This is a dangerous area; the Minister of Internal Affairs was specific in this being the FSB’s territory. Do you think we can quietly talk to those two *militziamen* of yours?”

“No. A few days after I spoke with them they got caught in a shootout with mobsters. Both are dead.”

The older Mershov removed his glasses, pressed his right palm against his face, breathed out and with his eyes still closed asked quietly, “Did they give you any other information?”

“Only that the surviving bodyguard’s name was Fyodor Bezdorukov and the FSB colonel’s name was Bogdan Zaychikov. I tried to look them up but their files are classified, *militzia* access level is not sufficient.”

“Did you try to look them up using your login?” asked Ivan in a hoarse voice.

“No, one of the killed *militziamen*.”

Ivan exhaled.

“After they were killed?”

“Yes.”

“So ‘they’ know someone is looking, but they don’t know who it is. I’ll see if my access is sufficient. Anything else?”

“Yes, but it’s different.”

Senior Mershov got up, fetched a half-empty bottle of vodka from the fridge and two small glasses.

“I am not much of a drinker, but tonight I need one.”

After both Mershovs downed a shot, Vitaly asked, “Do you remember Oleg Khmelco, my third cousin?”

“Of course I do. He used to spend a lot of time with us. When he started hanging out with bad company, I put him into *spetsnaz*. I

think he moved to America some years ago. I have not heard from him since.”

“Well, I have. I heard from him.”

“How is he?”

“Oleg is involved in something. He made sure we talked over an encrypted connection. Do you remember the Nemzhov affair two years ago?”

“Yes, of course. The head of the GRU was forced to disappear because a couple of amateur Americans fooled him and published the information about those that profited from the 2019 financial crisis. I wasn’t sure at the time whether the Chinese or the American government would survive the revelations. What does it have to do with Oleg?”

“He’s friends with those two Americans. And they have more information now. Dangerous information. He sent me some that has to do with using the SOFI financial network.”

“Why did Oleg contact you?”

“Actually, he wanted to get to you but was afraid to do it directly so he went through me. They want to warn the U.S. President Maxwell that Dimon is dangerous, that he may have been blackmailed by Nemzhov.”

“Why wouldn’t they warn the President themselves? Just publish the data!”

“They are fugitives. They’ve been discredited. Nobody would believe them.”

“And you do?”

“I believe Oleg.”

Ivan Mershov stared into space, then looked at his son.

“I think you should phone your work and tell them your mother is not well and you need to take another week of vacation. I want you here, where I can protect you. Now, let’s go to bed. The morning is wiser than the night.”

*Washington, D.C., USA*

President Maxwell walked into the room with an apology.

“Sorry, I was delayed on a conference call. General Carter, please start the meeting.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” replied Hugh Carter, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Our main agenda item for this meeting of the National Security Council is the potential conflict with China.”

“Besides anti-American demonstrations in Beijing and Shanghai, what are your reasons for expecting a conflict?” asked Cora Jones, National Security Advisor. “After all, such demonstrations appear to be a popular method for stirring up nationalistic feelings in China, letting out some steam so to speak.”

“True enough, Ms. Jones,” agreed Carter. “But this time we are witnessing a number of military activities that concern us: naval exercises, some involving the Russian Pacific Fleet, others including amphibious landing operations indicating preparations for a possible invasion, movement of additional missile batteries and aircraft to coastal areas from Ningbo to Xiamen, and trials of semi-autonomous operations of unmanned aerial vehicles over the East China Sea.”

“What is so bothersome about the trials of their drones?” challenged Defense Secretary Tom Blayn. “Everybody’s trialing those now.”

“The formations and types of drones being used indicate that they are trying to operate them without space-based assets, relying on local guidance using relays between drones. In any confrontation, both sides would try to go after space systems, trying to ‘blind’ the other side. That would point to them preparing fallback solutions.”

“We’re doing the same,” said Tom Blayn, “but we’re not planning to attack them.”

“We are also observing increased deliveries of containers to oil and gas platforms in the East China Sea and the Philippine Sea, particularly in their Senkaku Islands installations.” Carter pointed to the projected map.

“Oil platforms? What does that have to do with anything?” inquired White House Counsel Craig Lowe.

“We’ve been tracking these platforms for almost two years now, since our intelligence alerted us that these are actually primarily military installations. We have confirmed that these platforms’ main function is to launch missiles and drones. It’s a top-secret project within the People’s Liberation Army. We believe that they intend to attack our Seventh Fleet when it starts sailing towards Taiwan and comes within their range.”

“Interesting. And the Chinese don’t know that we know this?” asked Maxwell.

“Presumably not.”

“General Carter, you have mentioned landing operations and Taiwan. Does this mean you expect they’ll try to occupy the island?”

“That has been their long-standing goal since 1949.”

“If a war starts, what are you planning to do about these platforms?” asked Defense Secretary Blayn.

“They’re stationary targets, we’ll destroy them immediately.”

“OK, what’s the bottom line here?” said Maxwell. “If they go after Taiwan, what are our odds of deferring them?”

“I’d say better than fifty-fifty. Even though we have weakened our Seventh Fleet due to cutbacks, our naval assets greatly exceed what China has and their advantage in missiles is only relevant near their shores where their guidance is precise. As long as the Taiwanese are able to hold out for about ten days, which we believe they can do, we should be able to defeat the invasion.”

“And if their secret platform were to launch their missiles and drones?” asked Maxwell. “I’d like to understand what their estimate of the odds might be.”

“If they are able to prevent or sufficiently slow down our Seventh Fleet from getting into the East China Sea, then their invasion of Taiwan will likely succeed. But even then, Beijing will be facing a punishing ocean blockade that will likely destroy their economy before long.”

“And what if Russia joins the conflict on their side?” asked Cora Jones.

“That would certainly make things more difficult for us,” admitted Carter. “We still have larger naval resources in the Pacific than both China and Russia, but it would lower our odds of

defending Taiwan. Plus the blockade would likely become much less effective.”

“Can we add resources to the Seventh Fleet?” asked Maxwell.

“We have the Third Fleet in the eastern Pacific, the Fifth Fleet in the Middle East, and the Sixth Fleet in Europe. The Third Fleet at this time has only three strike groups, we can move one under the command of the Seventh Fleet within two weeks. The Sixth Fleet has two strike groups; we can move one of them within a month. The Fifth is probably too dangerous to touch given continued turmoil in the Middle East.”

“All right, let’s give the Seventh one strike group each from both the Third and the Sixth fleets,” Maxwell decided.

“But Mr. President,” protested Cora Jones, “we can’t weaken our European forces. We are stretched very thin there as is.”

“I understand, but that’s a chance I’m willing to take,” said Maxwell. “The danger of war in Europe is much lower and we want to signal to Beijing that we plan to defend Taiwan.”

He got up, signaling that the decision had been made and the meeting was over.

*Moscow, Russia*

Ivan Mershov stood by the window of his office, looking out on busy Petrovka Street. Earlier, warm summer rain had cleaned the air and washed the pavement. Muskovites were hurrying back and forth on their business.

The information that his son brought was dangerous. Not enough to do anything with, but enough to trigger a gut feeling that something was very wrong. Last week two *militziamen* had indeed been killed in St. Petersburg after being called to investigate a routine disturbance. Supposedly, they walked in on a mob dispute. He wanted to check the names that Vitaly gave him: the bodyguard Fyodor Bezdorukov and the FSB colonel Bogdan Zaychikov. He knew he should be able to do this with his access level, but he didn't want to leave any evidence of looking.

Mershov went to his desk and called his secretary.

"Valya, can you get me Stepan Ryzhkov? Yes, right away please."

Ryzhkov was OMON's IT expert. Two years ago Mershov used his influence to get one of Moscow's best surgeons to operate on Ryzhkov's child. It was time to call in the debt. Besides, he had to trust someone.

Ryzhkov appeared in five minutes with a careful knock on the door. As usual, he looked unkempt and disheveled, as if he just woke up.

"Colonel?"

"Come in, Stepa. Sit down. How's your son?"

An oblique reminder of the debt.

"He is fine, Colonel. Running around like new. What can I do for you?" Acknowledging the debt.

"Suppose I want to look up some restricted information... at my access level, of course. But I don't want others to know that I've been looking. Is it possible?"

"All access data is logged in. So there will be a record of your login. If someone set up an alert to indicate when there is an attempt to access a particular data record, they will trace it to you."

Mershov drummed his fingers on the table.

“Stepa, any suggestions? This is important.”

“Yes.” Ryzhkov looked very uncomfortable. “I can’t turn off the logging function unless it’s a system that I control. The only other solution I can offer is to pretend to be someone else.”

“I believe this information may require a very high level of access.”

“Colonel, remember how I always insist that people don’t put their login and password on little pieces of paper that they leave by their computer?”

“Yes, you are forever fighting human nature.” Mershov smiled.

“Last month, there was an FSB colonel working with us for a few days.”

“I remember him.”

“We set him up with access to one of our computers. When I went to check on him, making sure everything is working, he had a sticker with a login and two passwords on the table.”

“And you took it and told him not to do again?”

“No, but I copied them when he was out of the room. He was kind of a jerk, ordering me around like I was his serf. I wanted to get him in trouble by letting their security know that he is careless, but then thought better of it.”

Ryzhkov pulled a wallet out of his back pocket and removed a small piece of paper.

“Chances are it’s still good, although they are required to change passwords every three months. Are you going to use it here?” He nodded at Mershov’s computer on the desk.

“Yes, why?”

“Let me set up a connection with the TorPlus browser so your IP address won’t be logged.”

For security reasons, Mershov’s work computer was set up with an old-fashioned 3-D monitor and a keyboard. Someone thought that voice input and projection images were more vulnerable. Mershov smirked, thinking that the vulnerability was in people, not computer peripherals. After Ryzhkov left, Mershov used the careless colonel’s credentials to log into the FSB database. He typed in “Bogdan

Zaychikov.” The system requested a “special access” password, somewhat unusual for a simple personnel record. Mershov typed the second password from the little piece of paper that Ryzhkov left him.

Forty-seven years old, Zaychikov started his career as a young officer in the Second Chechen War. He joined the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or MVD, in 2002 while still in Chechnya and ran an Internal Troops paramilitary detachment. This was before he joined the FSB and moved to St. Petersburg in 2004. Mershov wondered if he ran into Zaychikov during that time. Zaychikov moved to Moscow in 2008 with a promotion to captain. He had asked to be transferred back to St. Petersburg only five months ago, for “family reasons.” Most of his work was in the Economic Security Service division, but on his last transfer he shifted to the Defense of Constitution and Fight Against Terrorism group.

Mershov moved to Fyodor Bezdorukov. At forty-three, he was a bit old for a bodyguard. He was also in the Second Chechen War, as a soldier. Undertaking Spetsnaz training, he stayed in the army until 2011. Afterwards, he joined the security detail for one of the banking oligarchs, working his way into a head of security position. In 2013, Bezdorukov suddenly left that job to join the Federal Security Service of the FSB. *That doesn't make much sense*, thought Mershov. *Why would he leave such an obviously better private position? Perhaps he ran into some trouble there.* Four months ago, Bezdorukov transferred to the regiment of the Russian Military Police tasked with guarding the Minister of Defense.

Mershov gave the computer a command: “Graph connections.” And waited a few seconds until he remembered that this unit only accepted typed instructions. It was a bit unnerving to work with a device that would neither listen nor respond. He entered the command, then had to type Bezdorukov’s and Zaychikov’s names again. The computer displayed a timeline graph, showing a thick line of strong connections from late 1999 to 2004. Bezdorukov served under Zaychikov in the regular army. When Zaychikov joined the MVD in 2002, Bezdorukov went with him to the same Internal Troops regiment.

Mershov stared at the screen, rubbed his chin, and typed in “Nikolai Nemzhov.” He only thought of this because of Oleg’s message; Nemzhov’s name was in his head. Mershov expected to see a connection in St. Petersburg. Instead, multiple contact lines appeared, starting in 2002 in Chechnya. According to the computer, Nemzhov was there for eighteen months, coordinating FSB field operations in the same district where Bezdorukov’s and Zaychikov’s Internal Troops regiment operated. Effectively, he was their boss. The Nemzhov – Zaychikov connection picked up again in 2004 when Zaychikov worked for Nemzhov in St. Petersburg and continued through the move to Moscow until 2011, when Nemzhov left the FSB for a promotion in the GRU.

The MVD – Chechnya connection bothered him. He could not quite put his finger on why, until he remembered that his boss, Dmitry Kolotov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, was in Chechnya when the MVD ran the operations there in 2003. At official dinners, Kolotov regaled them with his “Chechnya stories.” It was rumored he came back with a nice profit from that lawless land and time. Mershov took a deep breath, typed in “Dmitry Kolotov” and the connection appeared—they all overlapped in the same place in 2003.

Mershov shut down the computer. *Too many coincidences. Who can I trust?* Nobody high enough in the MVD, the GRU or the FSB. He thought of his friend Fyodor Bakunin, the Deputy Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR. The SVR was the GRU’s poor sister. They were supposed to work cooperatively but, as usual in such situations, the relationship was strained and mistrustful.

Mershov picked up his phone:

“Valya, can you get me Fyodor Bakunin from the SVR? Yes, right away please.”

*Beijing, China*

Jia Kecheng had been to the new Russian Embassy only once since it opened in 2021. It was much larger and better located than the old one on Dongzhimen Beizhongjie, symbolizing a close relationship between the two countries.

Despite some vague rumors about disagreements, the ambassador's birthday party was lavish and well attended. Jia knew that the invitation list would be long; as a lowly colonel in the General Staff he was not high enough to get invitations to any but the largest gatherings. As Jia and his wife mingled, politely chatting with other lowly folks from various countries, his eyes kept scanning the room.

Finally, he saw the man he wanted. Jia politely but somewhat abruptly excused himself, leaving his wife to fume in the company of some insignificant Iranian diplomat.

"Vasya!" He gently tapped a man's shoulder. Vasily Pomolsky, a Russian second military attaché, turned around and looked with a momentary misapprehension. Then recognition sparked in Pomolsky's eyes and his expression changed to a friendly one.

"Jia! It has been a long time."

Six years ago, Pomolsky and Jia helped oversee one of many in a series of Chinese and Russian joint military exercises. Being forced to spend eleven days together by the Amur River in the middle of nowhere, they struck a casual friendship of two men that liked each other but didn't have a whole lot in common.

"Yes, Vasya, I don't get many invitations to your embassy."

"I'd be happy to correct that."

"Thank you." Jia smiled, fully aware that Pomolsky wouldn't be able to get him more invites unless Jia got to the coveted rank of General. "How about we walk in the garden for a few minutes and reminisce about the old times on the Amur River?"

Pomolsky opened his mouth to beg off, but Jia gently tugged on Pomolsky's sleeve and pointed his eyes in the direction of the garden, indicating that the conversation would in fact be about something else.

“Yes, of course.” Pomolsky smiled back with his mouth but not his eyes. “Those were fun times.”

Once in the garden, Pomolsky led them to a fountain in the corner where the sound of water would mask the exchange, all the while laughing and chatting idly. The two men lit up their cigarettes.

“Is this about the East and South China Seas operation that the General Staff is planning?” asked Pomolsky.

Jia thought that his friend might have been bypassed for promotion three years ago because he was not patient enough to let the information come to him.

“Yes, we are planning it. You know?”

“Of course. I’ve been told that the timeline is late January, right after the new U.S. administration takes office.”

“What do your people think about it?”

“It’s good to have plans and the timing is interesting. But frankly, nobody takes it seriously. You plan Taiwan’s invasion every year.” Pomolsky shrugged. “But with the U.S. Seventh Fleet there, everyone thinks these are just more planning exercises. Next year there will be another exercise. We do the same thing over and over. Keeps us employed.”

Kecheng exhaled smoke and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“This might be different. The planning is done under the assumption that Russia will join and that the Pacific Fleet will be a part of the attack force.”

“What?” Pomolsky accidentally raised his voice. “We’ve never taken the mutual defense pact that far!”

Jia raised his palm to silence Pomolsky. “General Wu Cao specifically told our small team of planners to assume this. When one of my colleagues questioned how realistic this is, the General told him ‘You’ll see before the end of the month.’”

“That is very strange.” Pomolsky shook his head. “But perhaps it’s just a premise for the planning exercise, nothing more.”

“Perhaps,” Jia agreed. “We’ve also been told in our exercise to not worry about the Americans cutting us off from Middle East oil supplies because Russia will divert all its energy deliveries from Europe to us.”

A couple of other guests approached the fountain.

“Remember when that Russian captain got so drunk that he jumped into Amur River in full clothing and had to be rescued?” Jia laughed.

“Ha, yeah, I do. He lost his boots!” Pomolsky clapped, trying to appear in the midst of fun memories.

*Moscow, Russia*

It was a long drive to the Yasenevo district.

“Why did the SVR choose to locate themselves in the middle of nowhere?” grumbled Vasily.

Ivan Mershov laughed at his driver:

“Vasya, not everyone likes to be in the center of the city. For intelligence operations, being on the outskirts can be a good thing.”

Having the SBOR uniform helped. Upon arrival, both Mershavs were promptly processed and escorted to Fyodor Bakunin’s office. The secretary brought tea and they exchanged family news until Bakunin put down his tea glass.

“All right, Vanya, we’ve known each other for over forty years. You would not ask for an emergency meeting unless something major was happening.”

“Perhaps something is happening, Fedya, perhaps not. I am sorry to drag you into this. I have to find out more about Nikolai Nemzhov and I just don’t know who to trust.”

“Nemzhov?” Bakunin recoiled. “That snake? I thought we got rid of him.”

“I thought so too.”

“This requires more than tea.” Bakunin got up, went to his desk and opened the lower drawer. “Vodka or scotch?”

“Vodka.”

“You’d better start from the beginning,” said Bakunin after pouring generous portions.

Mershov hesitated. *You have to trust someone, might as well be a childhood friend.* Then he told the story that Vitaly brought in from St. Petersburg, then his own computer research and the apparent connections between Zaychikov, Bezdorukov, Nemzhov and possibly Kolotov.

After finishing, he gulped the rest of the vodka and said, “Fedya, please tell me I’m paranoid.”

“I don’t know, Vanya. Zaychikov and Bezdorukov transferring in the last few months to end up so close to the Defense Minister

Nedinsky's assassination? We've been in this business long enough to distrust coincidences."

Bakunin stood up and nervously paced the floor.

"Look, let me tell you about Nemzhov. He was a master bureaucrat. Very smart, very ruthless. The SVR is a separate organization that reports directly to the President, but the GRU is much bigger, so he always treated us like crap. Before coming to the GRU, he spent over twenty years at the FSB. He was in St. Petersburg when Mosin was still there. He was connected—on the outskirts, but still connected—to the original St. Petersburg mafia, to the *siloviki* that ended up running this country. I think he was angry that they didn't take him to Moscow in the late '90s, but as a good bureaucrat he bided his time, built his connections. And he always stayed close to the money, the big money. The money that disappeared when the Soviet Union fell. I know, I head the Directorate of Economic Intelligence here. I could tell that he knew where the skeletons had been buried, where the money was hidden. And he made sure others knew that he knew. That's what helped him to move to Moscow. That's what got him to the top of the GRU. And then he sold Mosin on the plan to bring down the American dollar. He worked on that for twenty years, waiting until the time was right, building alliances with the Chinese, the Iranians, the Brazilians. Patiently waited for a long time until he was ready to strike."

"And then two amateurs brought him down?" Mershov half-asked, half-stated.

"Exactly! Although in a strange way, I am not surprised. Sociopaths like Nemzhov, they think they can figure out and control everyone. And in most cases, that's true. To bring down people like that sometimes takes an inexperienced and unpredictable amateur doing what's unexpected."

Bakunin pivoted and planted his palms on the table across from Mershov.

"Once his role—and his outsized greed—had been exposed, he had no choice but to go on the run. He knew he would be sacrificed. I can only imagine how angry he is, burning with desire for revenge. Vanya, two rumors have quietly circulated since his disappearance.

One is that Nemzhov managed to get out most of his money, which was likely quite substantial.”

“And the second rumor?”

“That he got out his secret dossiers. Vanya, you are not a political animal; you are basically a soldier. So you may not know that everyone who is anyone in Moscow was scared of Nemzhov. It was believed—a belief that he strongly encouraged—that he had records on anyone worth keeping records on, both here and abroad. Between his years in the FSB and the GRU, he built up his connections and his files. He was glad to bestow favors on people; his price was always information. Any incriminating information would do. Illegal financial dealing, inappropriate sexual dalliances, bribes, anything that could be used to blackmail—he collected it. And with computers, tracking, video cameras everywhere, drones overhead—the data was pouring in, one just had to search for it. He didn’t even have to use it. He would just imply that he had “something” and people would fold. Because everyone is guilty of something and when the privacy is gone, when the government can potentially record everything you do or say, you can’t hide.”

“But if we know what’s in his secret files, we know whom he can blackmail?”

“That’s the problem! His files are gone. From what I’ve heard, he got rid of paper records years ago—so nobody can have them. He controlled access to electronic records and doled it out selectively to his lieutenants. He must have had his right-hand computer guy—who disappeared with him, probably eliminated—program a complete erasure sequence, because all the files have disappeared. It was a work of art, to erase everything, backups and all, so they can’t be restored.”

“But you think he has a copy?”

“Yes. Obviously, I don’t know; I’m not high enough. I only heard panicked rumors. But it’s logical to assume that he has the files. Which gives him the power to bend others to his will.”

“Fedya, what do you think we should do now?”

Bakunin sighed.

“What you have is very circumstantial. We can’t prove anything. I don’t know where to take it. I mean, if you go and cast suspicion on some high level people and this turns out to be nothing...”

“There is something else,” said Vitaly, who’d been quiet so far. He pulled a small flash drive from his pocket. “I have received a message from an old friend, Oleg. The last I know, he was in America. Oleg sent me records of suspicious transactions originating in our SOFI financial system and transferring large amounts of money into accounts of certain individuals in the U.S. He was asking to trace these transactions within the SOFI.”

“The SVR has access to the SOFI transaction records, but I personally don’t. What does this have to do with Nemzhov or Nedinsky’s assassination?”

“I don’t know.” Vitaly shook his head. “Only that all these things are happening at the same time.”

Bakunin stared out the window.

“More coincidences. Nedinsky’s assassination, when surrounded by people with Nemzhov’s connections, might be a sign that Nemzhov is putting his people—I mean, those that he can control—into positions of power. I wonder if he has something on Shelkov, the new Defense Minister. And if your boss, the Minister of Internal Affairs, is connected to Nemzhov, then he has two people controlling the military and the police under his command. This is too damn scary. We have to go to my boss, Mikhail Praschenko. I’m supposed to meet him for a briefing this afternoon.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I do. Nemzhov is his old nemesis. Praschenko can also have the SOFI records checked, to see if there is some connection.”

*You have to trust someone*, thought Mershov. “And if your boss thinks this looks suspicious, what then?”

“He reports directly to the President. He can get us in to see Mosin if needed.”

“Going to the President?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

Mershov did not.

*Richmond, USA*

Nancy Westlake, the head of internal security at FreedomShield, rubbed her tired eyes. When she retired from the NSA a few years back, she was determined to not get sucked into another high-pressure job ever again. Erik King convinced her to come back. Nancy was not doing this for the money, although they paid her well. Erik made her into a believer: they were going to restore the country's greatness, avenge the setbacks of the recent past, and push their enemies, especially the Chinese, back where they belonged. They were the new crusaders, defending liberty and democracy. The country needed sheep dogs to protect it from the wolves. That's what they were at FreedomShield: sheep dogs, vicious but righteous. That's why she continued to work seventy-hour weeks instead of enjoying retirement.

She exhaled heavily and reached for the top of the "Priority 3" pile. Nancy was old-fashioned and liked things printed out for reading, to the great consternation of her assistant, Richard, the tree-hugger. The pile had grown large, accumulated over a few weeks. She felt guilty just looking at it, but with all that'd been going on she had to trust the judgment of those filing the reports that these particular alerts were not urgent.

Nancy would quickly scan each alert's description and move the one page printout either to her left—for Richard to mark as 'reviewed, no follow-up required'—or to her right for further investigation. After a couple of hours, the pile was almost gone, almost entirely transferred to her left with only a couple of pages on her right.

She quickly scanned the piece of paper in her hand—some FBI agent in New Mexico researching financial transactions, why would this even raise an alarm?—and was about to move it to the left when her eyes zeroed in on "John Dimon" and "FreedomShield" on the bottom. Nancy read the one-pager again, this time more carefully. An FBI agent in a small resident agency of Farmington, New Mexico, by

the name of Jim Brobak, performed a series of searches of financial transactions through the SOFI gateways. She was not an expert, but she knew enough that while such transactions are perfectly legal, they can carry a stigma of trying to avoid the oversight of the U.S. authorities. Not the kind of publicity that John Dimon or FreedomShield would want, especially during this sensitive election time.

Nancy logged into the FBI database cluster using one of the “super user” accounts that FreedomShield had access to and said “Jim Brobak, FBI file.” Brobak’s recent picture appeared on the projection screen: a serious man in his mid-forties, creased forehead, short salt-and-pepper hair, tired brown eyes. Stellar service record: two tours of duty in Iraq, joined the FBI soon after, and rose through the ranks to become the assistant special agent in charge of the Dallas office. Suddenly, in the fall of 2022 there was a transfer to the Farmington office and an effective demotion. Why?

Nancy’s access allowed her global searches of all the data, including top-secret material. She found a secret memo from August of 2022 about Brobak related to the Schulmann affair: Brobak was suspected of helping the two fugitives, David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin, escape from the FBI. The memo concluded that while it seemed doubtful that Brobak worked with Ferguson and Sappin, his loyalty had to be viewed as questionable and he was not to be trusted with sensitive assignments.

The man that two years ago helped people that threatened the national security was now conducting searches for possibly damaging information on Dimon and FreedomShield. Nancy punched the intercom button.

“Richard, can you get me Erik King? Tell him it’s urgent.”

*Moscow, Russia*

President Mosin got up, walked to the window and stood there, hands clasped behind his back, contemplating the view of the city. He then turned around quickly, having apparently decided on something.

“So, Mikhail,” he addressed Praschenko, Director of the SVR, “you apparently feel strongly enough to bring these half-baked accusations to me?”

“Mr. President,” Praschenko stammered, “we are not accusing anyone.” He looked to his side, on Mershov and Bakunin sitting there with tense expressions. “We thought some of the facts deserved your attention.”

Mosin swept his eyes between three men.

“Stay here. I’ll be back.”

He exited via a side door, opened a door on his left and entered a small room. Praschenko, Mershov, and Bakunin were nervously looking at each other on the other side of a one-way glass.

“Volodya, Igor, what do you think of this? Too vivid imagination, a ploy, or something real?”

“Scary. Too many coincidences!” Igor Rodinsky, Minister of Energy, shook his head in disbelief. “Nemzhov was a ruthless bastard and I would take this seriously.”

“I agree.” Karpov nodded. “Too many coincidences. And yesterday’s report from Beijing made my antennas go up.”

“What report?” asked Rodinsky.

“Our military attaché in Beijing spoke at a party with a colonel from the PLA’s General Staff. The colonel told him that the General Staff is engaged in planning operations in the East and South China Seas, including the capture of Taiwan.”

“They always plan Taiwan’s capture,” Rodinsky waved dismissively. “But with the U.S. Seventh Fleet there, these are just exercises designed to keep the officers busy.”

“The colonel said that the General Staff believes that Russia, as a part of the mutual defense pact, will back them up in the conflict. That our Pacific Fleet will be a part of the strike force. And that we

will redirect the flow of oil from Europe to China, to compensate for any losses of the Middle East oil.”

“But we explicitly told them we will do no such thing!” shouted Rodinsky.

“That’s the whole point—General Wu Cao, the man in charge of planning, said that our position will change before the end of the month.”

“This is ridiculous!” Rodinsky opened his palms in surprise. “We will never agree to this.”

“We won’t ...” Mosin let the words hang in the air.

“You mean?”

“We don’t know what it means,” said Karpov. “Perhaps it’s a misunderstanding. Perhaps it’s a provocation of some kind. But it’s possible that the Chinese General Staff is operating under an assumption that there will be a change in power. Here, in Moscow.”

“This morning”—Mosin rubbed his forehead—“I was inclined to dismiss it. Now, I am not so sure. Three days ago Maxim Fedorov, head of the Kremlin Regiment, was wondering aloud to me why his cousin in the Army’s General Staff is working on plans for occupying the Baltic countries. I thought it’s just some routine thing. But all these baffling coincidences are starting to add up.”

He walked back and forth in agitation.

“Nedinsky was my old friend. Not only was his assassination suspicious, it robbed me of a critical support. Now it looks like someone was trying to push Shelkov in charge of the military. The people involved are connected to Nemzhov. Kolotov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, is possibly connected to Nemzhov. If I wanted to grab the power, I would go after the military and the police. And if they are planning something, they are going to do it soon, before the month is over.”

“This talk of Nemzhov’s secret files, everyone heard that. How much of this is true?” asked Rodinsky.

“A lot,” replied Mosin. “We questioned people that worked for him, that had restricted access, who were sifting through mountains of data looking for anything useful. He’s been accumulating these files for years. Electronic communication, telephone conversations, video footage... everything was digitized, run through face and voice

recognition systems, through any phrases of interest... then trusted people would manually look through the information computers marked as being of interest...”

“But I thought it was done as a part of the anti-terror effort?”

“Of course. The thing is, if you have the data, you can search for whatever you want. As long as you have the power, you decide what’s important. And Nemzhov had a lot of data, collected all around the world.”

“And it’s all gone?”

“Most of it. He had the system designed so that he was the only one that could copy anything and then destroy it. The key engineers that worked on it have all disappeared. Anyone might be subject to his blackmail.”

“Borya, who can we trust?” asked a shaken Karpov.

“I think we can trust them.” Mosin nodded at the one-way glass.

As time dragged on, Mershov shifted uncomfortably, feeling glances from Bakunin and Praschenko. Finally, Mosin came back into the room, accompanied by two others.

“Gentlemen, thank you for bringing this to my attention.” Mosin remained standing. “I would ask you to not share this with anyone else.”

“Of course, Mr. President,” the three said in unison.

“Now, I need you to do something for me. How many experienced field people do you have available? The kind that can follow someone without attracting attention? The kind that you can trust to be absolutely loyal to you and to keep a secret?”

“While most of our agents are abroad, we always have some people here. The trust is a more difficult question. On a short notice, I can probably put forward four or five people like that,” answered Praschenko.

“What about you?” Mosin turned to Mershov. “The SOBR, Special Rapid Response Unit, is a part of the MVD and I am not sure that everyone in the MVD is on my side.”

“Mr. President, I have over five hundred trained officers here in Moscow. Not everyone is available, not everyone is capable of such

work, and I can't vouch for everybody, but there are some that I brought with me and have known for years... I trust them."

"How many?"

"Perhaps fifteen."

"Colonel Mershov, I will ask you to take resources from both groups and organize a careful surveillance of Shelkov and Kolotov. Get someone in St. Petersburg to keep an eye on Zaychikov. Please report to me daily. You'll be provided with a contact."

"Twenty people." Mosin looked back at Karpov and Rodinsky after the others left. "That's what we have to work with."

"Why didn't you call on the Presidential Security Service?" asked Rodinsky. "You have over two thousand people there."

"Remember, two years ago I had to sack the head of the service because he was close to Nemzhov and was caught with his hand in a cookie jar. But we never dug in any deeper. Before I bring them in, I have to figure out whom I can trust besides Fedorov. If Nemzhov could get one of his people to "protect" Nedinsky, who says they can't get to me? But they probably don't have any particular reason to penetrate the SOBR."

"How about drone or satellite surveillance?" said Rodinsky. "More reliable, can't get away from it..."

"Igor, I always have a drone following me. And I know about it and I expect it. Drones are not supposed to follow Shelkov or Kolotov. If they see one, they know something is wrong. As for a satellite, in theory these people report to one of the two individuals we suspect. Look, either this whole thing is a bunch of nonsense or they have a putsch ready to happen soon. And if so, I may not be able to stop it by just grabbing those two. I have to know who else is involved, and I have to find this out quietly, without raising suspicions."

The three men sat glumly for a few minutes.

"And what about these SOFI transactions? The SVR thinks they are suspicious: large amounts of money going to John Dimon, the U.S. Presidential candidate, and we don't even know who these accounts belong to. The same accounts that are funding a U.S. security company and sending money to Chinese banks? Could

Nemzhov possibly have something on Dimon, the candidate that scares us as is?” asked Karpov.

“For now, I’ll just sit on this. There is no definitive evidence and no reason for us to get involved in their internal politics. We have to take care of our business. The SVR does not have full access; they just scratched the surface on this SOFI business. I want to take a closer look,” responded Mosin.

Karpov nodded, but he did not look convinced.

*Los Angeles, USA*

“Just the three of us?” asked Jeff. “Robert was not pleased with being excluded.”

“This is very sensitive, Jeff,” replied Jennifer. “David, would you agree that this is a delicate and potentially dangerous situation?”

David Weinstein nodded, looking very serious, and put a small folder on the table between them.

“OK, what is this about?”

“Jeff, do you remember the names of David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin?” asked Jennifer.

“Yes, they were the ones that published the Schulmann research two years ago.”

“Did you believe them?”

“Yes, for the most part. I mean, I believe that many people, especially those in power, profited from the 2019 financial crisis. In a sense, that disclosure helped to keep the country together. But whether all that they published was correct and whether they themselves profited from the publication, I don’t know. There was so much mud-slinging afterwards. They’ve disappeared, I think.”

“Jeff, I’ve met with them,” Jennifer stated plainly.

“What? When? Where?”

“Not long ago. Here, in LA.”

“But why?”

“They asked me to meet. They had important information to share.”

Jeff got up, angry.

“Jennifer, what in God’s name are you doing? Whether you like them or not, they are fugitives from the law! We can’t afford to meet with them in our current situation.”

“Jeff, the man who arranged the meeting knew my father,” Jennifer quietly said.

“Really?” Jeff sat back down. “Is there a connection?”

“I don’t know. Probably a coincidence. The point is, they had information tying John Dimon to profiteering from the crisis. And possibly more. I asked David to look into it.”

Jeff gave her a look that said, *Did you really have to get David involved in this?* but said nothing.

“They are clearly in hiding,” said David. “I’ve met with them in some place I’ve been driven to in two different cars. They gave me this.” He put his hand on the folder.

“And what is this?”

“It’s their findings related to John Dimon. Some of the accounts indirectly linked to him made out like bandits with the bets they placed in 2019. Moreover, many of the transactions are connected to the SOFI system – do you know what SOFI is?”

“Yes.” Jeff nodded.

“The SOFI connection continues to this day. When correlated for three degrees of separation, both John Dimon and FreedomShield appear to be connected to a significant flow of untraceable funds from the SOFI.”

“Appear?”

“There’s a statistically significant correlation.”

“Do any of the suspected accounts have Dimon’s name?”

“No.” David shook his head.

“Then you understand that I can’t possibly use it,” replied Jeff gently.

David lost his composure. “Jeff, I went through the numbers. It’s not possible for this to be accidental! Something is going on: not only did he profit from the crisis, somebody is illegally funding him now!”

“David, you might well be right. But as long as the connection is indirect, if I were to bring this up I’ll be destroyed in public opinion for unfounded accusations. Thank you for doing all this work; I realize it was risky.” Jeff got up again. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to talk to Robert.”

“David, this is not a random connection; this is happening, right?” asked Jennifer after Jeff left.

“It’s not accidental,” sighed David, his head down. “Dimon is dirty and he’s getting away with it.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.” Jennifer also got up to leave. She mussed David’s hair. “David, you’ve done what you could. Thank you!”

*Peredelkino, 13 miles southwest of Moscow, Russia*

Vitaly Mershov sneezed from pollen and was promptly rewarded with a kick from his partner, Andrei. Andrei was clearly not happy about being saddled with some young kid who was not even from the SOBR. But very few SOBR officers were called up for this strange and secret mission and Mershov was the son of Andrei's boss, so Andrei had to keep his grouchiness under control. He respected the older Mershov too much to complain.

For three days they'd been following General Yuriy Shelkov, the Minister of Defense. "Following" was too strong a word because they could not come close. Ten people, in five teams, changing cars, trading places, trying to be invisible, to stay at a respectable distance. For three days, Shelkov was either at home or in the headquarters on Arbatskaya Square. Until last evening, that is, when Shelkov and the accompanying car with additional bodyguards drove to this luxurious *dacha*. Two teams followed him here and spent an uncomfortable night in the surrounding pine forest. This morning, two other teams replaced them, one being that of Andrei and Vitaly. Crouching in the forest while being eaten alive by mosquitos was not exactly how Andrei liked to spend his Saturdays, so he was extra irritable. Vitaly didn't enjoy the situation either, but with his father running the operation, he felt it necessary to not grumble along with Andrei.

Andrei looked at his watch.

"We've been here for almost eight hours. It's getting dark. Hopefully, the next shift will be here soon. The bastards in the *dacha* are drinking and eating. What a waste of time."

Vitaly did not respond. Andrei was probably right.

"Hey, hey, hey, where is your fancy camera?" Andrei shook his shoulder. "Get ready!" He pointed at a cloud of dust approaching on the dirt road. "And don't use the flash."

Vitaly adjusted the camera. Not too dark yet. The magnification, the speed, the aperture. He tried to be as still as he could. The car pulled to the front; four people came out. He snapped a dozen 3-D pictures.

“Did you get it? Did you get it?” Andrei whispered excitedly.

“I did, I did,” Vitaly whispered back.

“Look, another one!” Andrei pointed to a new cloud of dust in the distance.

Four more cars arrived, one a few minutes after the other. Vitaly kept snapping the pictures.

*Farmington, USA*

Things could have turned out differently if the local movie theater had a slightly later showtime. Or if Antonio was not talking to his girlfriend and instead had answered an incoming call. A call that turned out to be totally unimportant. Or if Jim Brobak was a touch less conscientious and did not answer the call when he was hurrying to get out the door. Or if he didn't spill coffee on his shirt earlier that day and decided that he must go home and change.

But things happen the way they do, whether by design or by accident. The unimportant call was answered by Jim Brobak. It delayed Jim by eight minutes. As the result, Jim was running a touch late for meeting Gloria at a movie theater.

For a week after sending his research to David and Maggie, Jim was on the edge, expecting a call or a visit asking what was the purpose of his database queries. But nothing happened and he started to relax. Three days ago Maria, the office manager, invited him for a home-cooked meal. Jim accepted, figuring Maria wanted to talk about Iraq, where her son had fallen. During dinner Maria's daughter-in-law Gloria stopped by. Both Jim and Gloria suspected afterwards—rightfully—that it was a setup of two lonely people. But it worked. Jim called Gloria the next day and they agreed to go see a movie together.

Jim did not know that three armed people waited for him in his house. These people were professionals; they watched the house beforehand, knew that Jim would drive into the attached garage and come into the house from there. When they received the call from the fourth person who'd been following Jim in the car, the three inside got into their positions near the door leading from the garage.

But this time Jim was trying to save a few seconds. He parked on the street and went in through the front door. The people waiting for him rushed to the front. One bumped into a door. Jim, hearing noise, pulled out his gun.

Gloria waited for half an hour, then left thinking that Jim stood her up. It was only the next day that she found out that Jim had been shot.

*Richmond, USA*

Erik King, Nancy Westlake, and FreedomShield's head of special operations, Blair White, sat around the conference table in the King's office. A small phone sat in the middle of the table.

"Unfortunately, our people couldn't take Brobak alive," said White guiltily.

"Yes, I wonder why your vaunted commandos failed at such an important task." King was not happy. "We needed to interrogate him."

"I am sorry. Brobak somehow figured out that there was someone in his house, probably thought a burglar, came in with his gun drawn. He wounded two of my people; they fired in self-defense."

"How the hell are we going to find out who Brobak's been working with?"

"Our people found this,"—White pointed to the phone—"and over-nighted it to us."

Westlake picked up the phone:

"We looked at it just before the meeting. A typical limited-distribution secure device. Built-in strong encryption with an embedded key. The address book has one name, 'JohnP,' and a number with a Newfoundland area code."

"Newfoundland?" That surprised King.

"It's a gateway to a TOS-3 router; the area isn't relevant."

"Can we trace it?"

"Perhaps if we establish a regular communication, set up some data and traffic patterns... this would take a long time and has no guarantees."

"Can we get the encryption key out of this thing?" King pointed to the phone.

"We can't extract it from the outside. The secure processor is sealed and will self-destruct if we try to get inside of it."

"Why don't we just dial the number?"

"Doesn't buy us anything. They'll know that we have the phone and we still can't trace the call."

King got up and paced the room.

“Are you telling me the trail ends here? There is nothing we can do?”

“Well, there is one thing we can try,” said Westlake carefully. “We can send some data there. That’s how Brobak communicated with them.”

“And what good would that do?” asked White. “We still don’t know where it ends up.”

“We can include a small snippet of our code.”

“So the phone on the other end will start sending us signals?” asked King hopefully.

“Kind of. Remember, these phones are secure and they won’t allow an external application to just start sending anything out. We created a code that looks like a certified Bluetooth 6 update. If the phone allows signed updates of standard applications, it will update its Bluetooth program. Then at programmed intervals the phone will send out a special “pairing” message. If we hear it from three different detectors, we can triangulate the precise location.”

“Have we tried this previously?”

“Yes, we did it once before and it worked.”

“Great! What are we waiting for, then?” King spread his arms in mock wonderment.

“It’s not that simple. In the previous case, we had roughly one square mile area to operate in. Here, we are looking at the whole country. Bluetooth 6 has the maximum range of about 500 feet. This exceeds our detection capabilities by a couple of orders of magnitude.”

“Nancy, in such a case I don’t know why you even mention it. Just to tease me or something?”

“Erik, we don’t have the capability. The U.S. government does. If we instruct all the drones and electronic listening devices deployed nationwide to listen for this signal, we might be able to triangulate it.”

“We are talking about an unauthorized use of the U.S. surveillance infrastructure. If this comes out, nobody will save us,” White commented somberly.

King waved him off.

“Nancy, can we technically do this?”

“To some degree. Through our government contracts, we have access to most of the surveillance infrastructure. If we do it during the night hours when supervision is less tight and for relatively short periods of time, we might be able to do this undetected. But as Blair said, they’ll fry our asses if this comes out.”

“Nancy, let me worry about that. How quickly can you set it up?” King sat back at the table.

“We can run it tonight.”

“Do it, then.”

Westlake and White got up to leave. King stopped White.

“Blair, stay a minute.”

After Nancy Westlake closed the door, King told White.

“Suppose Nancy succeeds. I would want these people taken or eliminated immediately. Preferably taken.”

“But we don’t know where they are.”

“That’s why I am talking to you. Prepare as much as you can in advance. Have your commando’s teams and support drones ready to go. Mobilize teams in major cities. Particularly in Los Angeles.”

“Why Los Angeles?”

King got up and paced the floor again. Then deciding on something, he abruptly turned to White.

“The FBI’s surveillance of Jeff Kron picked something up today. Kron was talking to his campaign manager Marosyan as they were walking from campaign headquarters to Kron’s car. They were talking about information possibly tying John Dimon to the 2019 crisis. Marosyan wanted to use it, Kron didn’t feel comfortable, thought it was a trap. I think whoever is on the other side of that phone is talking to Kron. Doesn’t mean they are in LA, of course, but makes it more likely.”

“What are you going to do about Kron?” asked White quietly.

King stood in front of the window, took a couple of deep breaths.

“Blair, John Dimon must win this election. Otherwise, not only does this company go down the drain, but so does the country.”

*Laguna Beach, USA*

Jennifer was trying to focus on driving, but her thoughts kept creeping back to the fight. She and Jeff did not fight a lot, but when they did it was intense. They were both stubborn.

She told him she was going to Laguna Beach to ask Grandfather for help with communicating Dimon's information to the president. He tried to talk her out of it. She refused. Jeff eventually gave up.

"You are so Goddamn stubborn! Sam Baker would not want to get involved with this. We need you here; your town hall program is very popular with women. Instead, you're going to waste a day on a useless pursuit!"

Jennifer slammed the door as she left. She did not think that Grandfather would help either, but she had to try. Jeff was falling further behind Dimon in the polls. Besides, the prospect of Dimon becoming the president now terrified her.

Jennifer parked the car, walked into the house past the guard that nodded at her, and made her way to the patio. As she expected, her mother was there with Caroline.

"Hi, Mom, hi, Caroline!"

"Hi, Jennifer! I didn't know you were coming?" Karen was surprised.

"Yes, it was unplanned."

"Nana went to the beach with some friends. They should be back soon." Seeing Jennifer's expression, Karen quickly added, "Two armed guards went with them."

Caroline jumped in. "We watched the interview that Jeff and you gave on SBS." "You guys were great!"

"Thank you, Caroline."

"Jenny, I recognize this determined look." Karen's eyes narrowed. "There is a reason for your visit besides seeing your daughter and your mother, right?"

"Yes, Mom, there is. I came to ask Grandpa for help."

“What kind of help?”

Jennifer remained silent. Caroline got up.

“I just remembered, I have something I need to pick up at the hardware store...”

“Caroline, sit down.” Karen stopped her. “Jennifer, if you want something from the old grouch, you better get Caroline to help you. She is the only one he’ll listen to. He has a thing for her. And I don’t blame him. Also, the patio is swept for listening devices weekly and has some jamming ‘white noise’ doohickeys installed to prevent remote listening. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“Very well.” Jennifer sat down and poured herself iced tea.

After she finished the story of meeting Oleg and then David, Maggie, and Dimon’s possible involvement in the 2019 crisis and suspicious financial activities, Karen exhaled hard.

“So this Oleg...he saw your father in St. Petersburg a few days before Pavel’s death?”

“Yes.”

Karen dabbed a handkerchief at her eyes.

“I am sorry. Eighteen years and still... Maggie and David, they’re still wanted, right?”

“Yes, they’re wanted for questioning.”

“Do you believe them?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And what did Jeff say?”

“He did not want to go after Dimon. Thought this might be a provocation.”

“What a wuss!” Caroline slammed the table. “Your husband is a decent man, but he is swimming with sharks. That slick Dimon character, he reminds me of those priests that preach celibacy, but once a curtain is down, they bugger little boys in the back.”

“So, Caroline, you think the story is true?” asked Karen.

“Of course I do. I remember how two years ago they broke the story and people were ready to march on Washington with pitchforks. But then the spin started and people went back to watching the Kardashians in ‘ultra-high frequency 3-D.’ And then the ‘immersive experience’ came and everyone forgot. Poor Maggie and

David risked their lives and ended up with dirt smeared all over them.”

“Do you have any proof?” Karen turned to Jennifer.

“Yes.” Jennifer pulled from her bag the folder that David Weinstein brought from the meeting. “Account numbers, names, amounts, dates... Not only Dimon, but that FreedomShield security firm that works for him is involved as well.”

“And you want to do what?”

“I want to ask Grandpa to take this to Joe Maxwell.”

“The president?”

“Yes, the president.”

“Gutsy, but makes sense,” agreed Caroline. “Trying to publish this won’t do any good. The president can investigate and arrest Dimon.”

“Your grandpa is out of politics,” said Karen. “But let me bring him here, see if we can convince him.”

Sam Baker might have aged on the outside, but his mind was going strong; he quickly grasped the implications.

“This is either an elaborate trap or Dimon broke the law and someone with enough resources might be able to blackmail him... plus a possible foreign involvement. And only someone really high up can investigate and do something about it.”

“Yes, Grandpa,” Jennifer confirmed. “Would you help us?”

“My dear child, you know that after that horrible scandal two years ago I quit politics and swore to never set my foot in Washington again.”

“But, Sam, you were not involved,” Caroline protested.

“No, but others were. And I did business with them, and I shook their hands. And then they managed to avoid responsibility and many are still there, business as usual.”

“Then go and help to change it! Your grandson-in-law is trying to end business as usual—help him!”

“Dear Caroline, I’m sorry, but I’m old and I washed my hands of all politics.”

“Grandpa, please help us,” Jennifer pleaded.

“Jennifer, have you thought of the possibility that this information is not correct? The people you are dealing with are fugitives from the law. They tell you that some of this research came from the FBI, but you have no way of verifying this. If this turns out to be not true, Jeff, you, me—we’ll all be ruined.”

Sam Baker got up and shuffled back into the house.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” Karen patted Jennifer’s hand. “I’m not surprised. It was a lot to ask of him. It’s getting late. Would you have dinner with us and stay the night?”

*Moscow, Russia*

Four people were gathered in a semi-dark room, watching 3-D projections.

“The pictures were taken last night in Peredelkino, at Yuriy Shelkov’s *dacha*,” Ivan Mershov informed them. “Shelkov arrived at the *dacha* on Friday night. The visitors started arriving Saturday evening. This is the first arrival.”

“Leader of the Western Military District, Colonel General Valery Pashin,” said Maxim Fedorov, head of the Kremlin Regiment. “Headquartered in St. Petersburg.”

“What the hell is he doing here?” asked Vladimir Karpov. “Did anyone call him to Moscow?”

“Not that I know of,” Mosin dryly commented. “But he commands the Seventh and Twenty-first Guards Armies positioned on the outskirts of the city.”

The next set of pictures appeared in a holographic projection and Mosin exhaled sharply.

“Pavel Zaporozets!”

“Yes, the current head of the GRU.” Mershov nodded.

“In charge of over twenty thousand Spetsnaz troops and most of our satellite intelligence capabilities,” added Fedorov.

Another image appeared, of a tall, thin, balding man.

“Kolotov, the Minister of Internal Affairs,” Karpov stated the obvious.

At the sight of the next image, Mosin leaned forward and braced his head in the palms of his hands.

“General Yevgeniy Kunin, head of the FSB’s Federal Protection Service,” Fedorov explained. “My boss.”

“Who is that?” asked Mosin about the next holographic image.

“Took us a bit of time to figure this out,” responded Fedorov. “That’s Arkady Primak. He used to be Nemzhov’s right-hand man, his computer genius. Disappeared two years ago at the same time as Nemzhov. Just enough plastic surgery to fool the face recognition systems.”

They sat grimly through a few more images.

“Were you able to capture their conversations?” Mosin turned to Mershov.

“No, Mr. President. Our people were under strict instructions to keep their distance and to avoid discovery. The *dacha* had electronic defenses built into it, generating enough white noise to make any distant eavesdropping useless.”

Mosin nodded.

“They have covered all their bases... the military, the police, the secret service... can you think of any reason for these people to come together in a remote location on a Saturday evening? Especially if one of them is based hundreds of kilometers away?” asked Mosin.

There was silence around the table.

Mosin drummed his fingers on the table, made a decision.

“Colonel Mershov, thank you for your service. I would like to ask you to have your people report here to Maxim Fedorov tomorrow. There are so few that we can fully trust at the moment.”

“Maxim.” Mosin pivoted to Fedorov. “You have the toughest job for tomorrow. You’ll get twenty people from Colonel Mershov. That’s not enough. Find more. We have to quietly and at the same time arrest as many of those people that were at the meeting as we can. Including your boss. Pashin will be particularly difficult, since he’s back in St. Petersburg. Find a way.”

“Vladik,” he said, turning to Karpov, “I am going to request that Shelkov comes here tomorrow to follow up on the Chinese situation. I want to arrest and interrogate him right here. I will need your help.”

Mosin got up.

“Gentlemen, thank you for your loyalty. It won’t be forgotten. Now, we have a lot of work to do.”

*Somewhere in Nevada, USA*

A trailer in a remote mountainous location looked like one of the survivalist sites, ready to be used in case of emergency. Such trailers were hidden all over Nevada, Arizona, and other states. But someone trying to break into the trailer would have quickly found that the trailer was ready to defend itself with various types of traps and motion-activated repellents. If the intruder managed to get through those and make his way to the heavily fortified door, he would be greeted with an electric shock, a spray of poisonous fumes, and a few other assorted surprises. And if despite all that he did manage to get inside, he would discover walls of dark monitors waiting to be turned on—if he could survive to get to the switch, as the deadliest ambushes were on the inside.

But the man that drove up in a big truck was not an intruder. He calmly avoided or turned off the defenses and flipped on the power. The trailer came to life. Lights came on, satellite antennas unfolded on the roof, additional monitors slid out of their hiding places. The place took on the appearance of a command center. Which was exactly what it was: a remote drone command center.

The man reviewed his instructions, read out the address and one of the displays obediently focused on a small single-family house. He'd done this many times before, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Nicaragua, even Mexico. But never in the U.S. The man hesitated momentarily, remembering his oath: "defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic." He had a thought to check who lived at this address, something he'd never done before. Superiors decided who the enemies were; they had the information—he didn't have to know the target personally. His job was to execute the orders. This time the enemy was domestic. The oath still stood.

The man entered the precise coordinates—put them dead center on the chimney, to minimize the collateral damage—and sent the command. Satellite bounced the signal to a receiving antenna miles away. The roof of the remote storage opened and an originally

Chinese-made vertical takeoff drone armed with one twenty-pound air-to-surface missile rose from its confinement. The operator gently guided the drone with a joystick to its cruising altitude and set the course to the west.

*Laguna Beach, USA*

Jennifer slept fitfully. She was in the same room that she'd slept in years ago, when she had just moved to California to go to college. The sound of the waves used to easily lull her to sleep. Tonight, it was like a roar, heaving, threatening. She got up in the middle of the night, tiptoed to the balcony to see if a storm was gathering. It was a clear night and the ocean was the same as during the day, calm and peaceful. Perhaps it was her blood pumping through her brain as if in a tempest. She fell asleep as the light started seeping through the blinds.

When she heard screams, Jennifer first thought it was still her dream. But screams became louder and suddenly someone was shaking her hard. She jumped up and saw Nana holding her shoulder and shouting, "There was an attack! Father! Father!"

Jennifer rushed out of bed and ran toward the sounds, into the kitchen. Her mother and grandfather were staring at a TV screen that showed burning remains of a house. They turned and looked at Jennifer in horror. Then she started connecting the image, the commentator's voice, the letters running across the screen, the neighboring houses, her neighbor Betty on the lawn with hands folded in a prayer...

Jennifer ran outside to the car, opened and started it with her fingerprint and drove off.

*Moscow, Russia*

Yuriy Shelkov arrived in the Kremlin for the second Chinese briefing in two weeks. “They are so focused on China, they’re not seeing what’s going on under their noses,” he thought as his car was waved through security.

He was shown into a different conference room, a windowless one in the basement. Once there, Shelkov opened his China file and looked through a few figures. He had them memorized in any case.

Mosin and Karpov walked in. To Shelkov’s surprise, they were accompanied by two young men in paramilitary uniforms with patches that he didn’t recognize.

“Good afternoon, Yuriy,” said Mosin.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President,” Shelkov responded. “Now, you wanted to focus on the Chinese naval capabilities...”

“No, Yuriy, I don’t,” interrupted Mosin. The two young men in paramilitary uniforms stood on each side of Shelkov. “I looked at your file. Your great-grandfather fought under Marshal Budenye’s command in the Civil War, defending Moscow. Your grandfather served under General Vatutin in the Battle of Kursk and later marched on to Berlin. Your father was a distinguished officer, a division commander. You took the oath to serve your country. Who are you really serving, Yuriy?”

Shelkov remained silent, stunned, paralyzed.

Projections of Nikolai Nemzhov and Arkady Primak came up on the wall.

“These are the people you are serving now, Yuriy?” thundered Mosin. “Your co-conspirators are being arrested as we speak. Are you looking forward to your name and your family being dishonored? Answer me!”

“No,” whispered Shelkov.

“What were you planning, Yuriy? How did they get to you? Tell us and we’ll give you an honorable way out. Your family will be protected.”

“They were blackmailing me. In 2017, I suppressed incriminating information about my grandson. This man, the one that worked for

Nemzhov, he knew. Then, in 2019, Nemzhov offered me a chance to profit from the coming dollar crisis. I took it. I made good money.”

“What were they planning to do?” asked Karpov.

“The plan was for the Seventh Guards Army to move into the city. Together with the MVD forces, they were going to take over the government buildings and the TV stations.”

“And then?”

“You were to be arrested together with your supporters for being in alliance with the Americans. General Nemzhov was going to come to power with a promise to hold popular elections within twelve months.”

“Was he going to make promises to the Chinese?”

“Yes, he was going to promise that we would support them in taking over Taiwan. That our Pacific Fleet was going to join their attack. Also, we were going to tell them that we can jam some of the American communications capabilities because the chips from MRA Technologies, the company that supplied them, had a backdoor we could exploit. But it was all a deception.”

“Deception?”

“Yes, deception. The Chinese attack was going to take place in January, right when the new American president was going to take the office. Supposedly, Nemzhov had a deal with the incoming U.S. President Dimon: our Pacific Fleet was going to stay put, no electronic jamming would have taken place. We were goading the Chinese to attack the Americans so the Chinese army and navy would be destroyed.”

“But why?”

“In return, America would stand by while we attack Eastern Europe. We were going to take the Baltics, Poland, Slovakia, Finland, Czech Republic, Romania, Belorussia, the rest of Ukraine. Back to the two superpowers, America and Russia dividing the world.”

“This is insane!” shouted Karpov.

“That was the plan,” Shelkov responded.

“So he was going to betray the Chinese to the Americans. Why did Nemzhov think he could get away with this?” asked Mosin.

“He was sure that Dimon was going to win the election and he must have had something on Dimon. He has something on everyone,” murmured Shelkov.

“Where is Nemzhov?”

“I don’t know. He never showed up in person, always worked through his people, like Arkady. I think he’s somewhere in Russia because he was going to show up right after the coup. That’s all I know.”

“Thank you, Yuriy,” said Mosin.

“How can I protect my family?”

“We can arrest you and sentence you to death for treason, but I’d rather avoid the spectacle of a public trial. You can be a hero, dying in a terrorist attack. I am not too fond of this solution either, since your predecessor was killed only a few months earlier. Cooperate and you can keep your life. You’ll lose your position and assets, of course. Your choice.”

Shelkov stared out the window for a minute, then said, “If Nemzhov gets a wind of this, he’ll kill my family.”

“When we get him, your family will be safe. In the meantime, we’ll protect them.”

“I’ll do it,” Shelkov whispered hoarsely.

Mosin stood up.

“Very well. You will be debriefed.”

Mosin and Karpov left the room.

Shelkov tried to get up, but one of the men in a paramilitary uniform pushed him back into his chair.

*Los Angeles, CA*

Alejandro awoke from a persistent knock on his bedroom's door. He looked at the clock: not even 7 a.m. yet. Thankfully, he did not stay up late last night. *This better be good*, he thought opening the door.

Mike Munoz, his bodyguard and security chief, stood there with a guilty expression.

"What?"

"Look, boss, it might be nothing, but you better come see this."

Alejandro followed Mike to the ground floor, then to the closet with electronics equipment. Mike pointed to the spectrum analyzer.

"See, boss, it has a yellow light on."

Red light meant a pre-programmed alarm was triggered, indicating a likely security breach. This would have caused a loud sound warning, waking everyone up. Yellow meant something unusual, not quite expected, not an alarm but a warning. No sound alert was programmed.

"Why?"

"If you look at the timeline, there were two unexpected short transmissions in the 2.4 Gigahertz band, one at 3 a.m. and one at 5 a.m...."

"Speak English, for God's sake!"

"It may have been Bluetooth transmissions."

"Where did they come from?"

"I don't know yet. Most home devices now have Bluetooth built in."

"So it could have been a stupid refrigerator checking what's on sale in a local supermarket?"

"Could have been, but the analyzer flagged it because the pattern and the intensity were unusual."

"Hmmm... how many false alarms we get here?" Alejandro nodded at the collection of electronic devices in the closet.

"About once a week." Mike lowered his head guiltily.

Alejandro was about to go back to bed to catch another hour of sleep when Mike said, “You probably didn’t hear yet, but Jeff Kron was attacked during the night.”

“What? How?”

“All I heard on the news was that a missile hit his house...”

Mike froze following Alejandro’s expression.

*David received a message with a file from Brobak last night. Kron hit. Bluetooth transmission.*

“Get the car ready and call Pablo to execute Plan B!”

“Why?”

“Go, now! We’re getting out of here!”

Alejandro ran upstairs two steps at a time and started pounding on bedrooms’ doors.

“David, Maggie, Oleg, get up! We are leaving! Now!”

His guests ran out of their rooms to see Alejandro in a robe, screaming.

“Get dressed, you must be down in the garage in five minutes! Don’t take anything!”

Ten minutes later, the black SUV rushed out of the garage, tires screeching. Mike was driving, no auto pilot this time, his phone ringing repeatedly.

Alejandro in the passenger’s seat next to him, a sports bag in his lap, explaining to a bewildered and disheveled Oleg, David, and Maggie, “There was an assassination attempt on Jeff Kron’s life, and we have had a suspicious transmission out of the house during the night, right after you received a message from Brobak. If it was from Brobak.”

“It was a bit strange, another run of the same query that Brobak did earlier.”

“Then it probably was not from him but from someone who’s got the phone we sent.”

“What happened to Jeff Kron?” asked Maggie.

“Don’t know. Right now, we have to worry about ourselves. We must assume that the house was under surveillance and that this car is

being tracked. We are going to try to trade cars in a large covered parking structure. The exchange should be ready in half an hour.”

“There are files on my computer...” started David, but Alejandro already turned to Mike.

“Why the hell is Nick not responding?”

“Might be asleep.” Mike shrugged.

Just then, a young man’s voice came out of the speaker.

“Yo, Mike!”

“Hey, Nick, Alejandro here. We need some help.”

“Alejandro, what’s up? It’s a fucking crazy morning! A missile attack in Culver City, police copters and drones all over the place.”

“Nick, look, we are heading towards your area using side streets. Black Caddy SUV. Going south on Crenshaw, about to cross Slauson. Can you tell me if there are any drones on our tail?”

“Oh, man, with all this shit going on I’ve been keeping my observation drone below two hundred feet...”

“Come on, Nick, we really need a hand here!” shouted Alejandro.

“OK, OK, lifting it, the police are to the north of us and might let it go... Zooming in... Hey, I see a black Caddy with a hump, must be you. Oh, shit!”

“What???”

“There are two birdies half a mile behind you, at about three hundred feet.”

“What kind of birdies?”

“Zooming in... looks like commercial AeroHawk 7D model drone.”

“No weapons?”

“No, this thing is optimized for tracking. 3D imaging, infrared, onboard pattern recognition ...” Nick was getting excited, but Alejandro cut him off.

“Good, no weapons. Now, Nick, as we get to Torrance, I need you to get rid of them.”

“You want me to knock them down?”

“Yes, damn it! You told me you could do that!”

“Yes, but I might lose my drones,” whined Nick.

“Nick, don’t give me this crap! With what I’ve been paying you, you should be able to make plenty more!”

“OK, OK, I am starting my interceptors. Oh, fuck!”

“What is it now??” screamed Alejandro.

“I see two more birdies... these look like military Firestorm-5X bitches. They are three miles behind you but gaining fast.”

“Are they armed?”

“Yes, with grenades. Designed to attack tanks and vehicles. They should get to you just around Artesia.”

“Nick, you have to take them out too!”

“These are tough, Alejandro. I am putting everything I’ve got in the air.”

“Do you best, Nick! Stay on the line!” Alejandro barked out and turned to Mike.

“Get Pablo back on the phone on another line; tell him the rendezvous place is now at Del Amo!”

Mike turned on the 360 degrees projection display and zoomed in on the sky above. They could clearly see two small fixed-wing drones, now almost directly above them. Further behind, two much larger black machines loomed.

As the car was racing through the streets, an aerial battle was unfolding above. Six quadricopter drones raced from the south. Three peeled off to face the two tracking drones right above the car, three others continued forward to the attack drones that were only a mile away. When getting close to the tracking drones, the quadricopters one by one fired metallic nets. One missed but two others found their targets, snaring the propellers of their marks. Both AeroHawks stalled and fell to the ground.

“Yes! Take that! You bitches aren’t up for dogfighting with a big dog!” Nick was screaming. “Took down the trackers! Piece of cake!”

“What about the attack drones?”

“Just about, just about...”

“What if Nick can’t take them down?” asked Maggie in a small voice. From the vehicle, they saw the big drones soaring up, trying to get away from Nick’s interceptors.

“That won’t be good,” answered Mike.

“We better get to a parking structure and hope they won’t follow us there,” explained Alejandro in a tense voice.

On the display, one of the black birds was tumbling to the ground uncontrollably. “Yes!” exclaimed Alejandro.

Nick came back online:

“Hey, I brought one down, the other took evasive maneuvers and I can’t catch him. He lost some time, but he’ll catch up with you in thirty seconds!”

The big fixed-wing drone reappeared on the display a couple of hundred yards behind them. Now they could see a missile hanging under each wing. Mike gunned the engine, went through a red light on a largely empty street and turned sharply into a parking structure, breaking the gate arm. Something exploded just behind them, sending a shower of cement pieces against the car.

Mike then raced the car down one floor, slammed the brakes next to an “Exit” sign and barked, “Everybody, out!”

All five jumped out of the car and ran to the door, as the noise of a propeller engine rose in the enclosed space. They were only a few steps inside when an explosion blew the door down.

Everyone caught their breath as Mike spoke on his phone.

“Pablo is in the parking structure on the other side of the mall. The mall isn’t open to the public yet, so we’ll have to run through.”

Alejandro had kept his presence of mind enough to bring the sports bag, which was useful when they came to a closed door. Mike got a small electronic device out of the bag and held it next to the code entry lock. The device whirred, clicked, and displayed four numbers which Mike punched and pushed the door open.

“So much more elegant than using a crowbar or a gun,” commented Alejandro.

As they were walking through a largely empty mall, with only workers preparing for the day, nobody tried to stop them. At one point, a display started talking to them.

“Grayson Martinez, we have a sale on men’s suits in your size. It’s been two years since you last purchased a suit, isn’t it time to update your wardrobe?”

“Grayson Martinez?” asked Maggie.

“I use a few different names,” said Alejandro matter-of-factly. Mike was busy dialing again.

“Nick, we’re in the mall. What’s going on outside?”

“Thank God, you are OK! There are reports coming in of multiple explosions on the southeast side of the mall. Police are on the way, you better get out of there!”

“Are there any birdies waiting for us?”

“I’m going to have to bring my observation platform down just about now. There are a couple of tracking birdies coming in from the east, they should be here in a minute.”

“But no attack drones?”

“No. I saw one following you into the parking structure, he didn’t come out. Probably brought down by his own explosion.”

“Tell Nick he’s earned his pay today,” quipped Alejandro.

Mike led the group to the service entrance section of the parking lot. He carefully opened the door, looked around. Police sirens sounded in the distance, but this area seemed calm. A bakery truck idled nearby, with one man in a white uniform in the driver’s seat and the other looking like he was about to unload something from the open rear gate.

Following Mike’s lead, everyone ran to the back of the truck and climbed in past rows of bakery products. There were two small benches in the back. The uniformed guy closed the bakery shelves behind them. In a few seconds, the truck started rolling and Alejandro exhaled.

“The insides of the truck are covered with a Mylar material to attenuate the body heat,” Mike proudly explained. “It takes about twenty minutes before your heat signatures become strong enough to be detectable by drones with infrared tracking.”

“Twenty minutes?” asked David. “What happens then?”

“In twenty minutes, we’ll be in a different car.” Alejandro shrugged. “We’ll change cars a couple of more times to make it more

difficult to cross-correlate the data and track us. It's the initial run, when they know exactly which car you are in, that's the most dangerous one. We got out... barely. Somebody really wants you dead."

"They got to us through Brobak?" Maggie half-asked, half-stated.

"Yes, it looks that way. You should assume Brobak is dead."

David hung his head. *Another man dead because of us.*

"Jim chose to help," Maggie said, reading his thoughts. "Like others did two years ago. People have the right to know."

*Los Angeles, USA*

Jennifer Rostin-Kron was numb. Numb from speeches, condolences, hugs, handshakes. Numb from the sense of loss that chilled her insides. Numb from guilt—she was supposed to be at home with him that night. Instead, Robert Marosyan was in the house with Jeff, sleeping in the spare bedroom as he often did. Now, both of them were gone.

Her mother recognized the torment.

“Jenny, don’t torture yourself. There was nothing you could do against a drone with a missile. You would have died as well, without saving Jeff.”

“A drone with a missile...” repeated Sam Baker, leaning on his cane even more than just two days ago when Jennifer saw him. “How the hell does someone get away with this? Didn’t we sign laws to prevent such things?”

“The drone self-destructed over the ocean. Nobody knows where it came from,” David Weinstein grimly explained. “We were told that it flew in the dark and had no radar signature. Nobody knows what model it was and where it came from. But the missile was of Chinese manufacture.”

“How convenient!” exclaimed Roger Moonson, a retired professor that Jeff chose as his VP running mate. “The Chinese had no reason to go after Jeff, but now politicians will cry crocodile tears and claim that the Chinese killed him.”

“Huh, Dimon already said that!” Weinstein spit out. “He’s using Jeff’s death to support his platform.”

Jennifer abruptly turned and walked away. For the past two nights she had the nightmare of seeing a missile streaking towards their house, seeing herself screaming at the top of her lungs for Jeff to get out, but no sound would come.

“Jenny” Sam Baker’s hand gently squeezed her shoulder. “Can I please have that paper you showed me in Laguna Beach? I will go to Washington and meet with Maxwell.”

“Dad, are you sure you’re up for it?” Karen was now by her father’s side. “Perhaps you should try to get an appointment with the President first?”

“No, Karen, that’s not the way to do it.” Sam Baker shook his head. “I am a ‘has-been,’ a respected one but a ‘has-been’ nevertheless. If I try to arrange for an appointment from here, it’ll be months before I get on his schedule. But if I show up there and people see me, an elderly congressman trying to get a few minutes with the president... he’ll see me quickly.”

“Very well, Dad. I’m coming with you,” stated Karen, leaving no room for objections.

*Moscow, Russia*

The briefing having been concluded, everyone left except for Maxim Fedorov, the head of the Kremlin Regiment.

“Tell me again, Maxim, how many have you arrested so far?”

“Twenty seven. Five we have under observation, but we’re not touching yet. Eight more are being searched for.”

“Do you think there are more than that?”

“Perhaps a few,” allowed Fedorov, “but probably not many. We captured Arkady Primak, Nemzhov’s chief assistant. He is singing like a canary, trying to save his skin. And he had a big chunk of Nemzhov’s electronic archive in his possession. Our computer experts are poring over it now. We’re trying to find his financial network and his remaining associates, here and abroad. We’ll pull his claws out.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to grab Nemzhov? I want him captured. Should I bring in the FSB to help?” Mosin’s tone left no doubt that not capturing the man would be considered a major failure.

“Mr. President, we just missed him by a few hours. All internal surveillance networks, all transportation systems, his remaining associates and people that he may go to for help—everything’s being watched. With his prior ties to the FSB, however, I’m reluctant to engage them.”

“It’s unbelievable what extensive damage one man can do when he has the ability to collect so much information on everyone.”

Mosin shook his head ruefully. “A few years ago he was sitting right here, explaining to me how his surveillance networks will eradicate terrorism, increase the collection of taxes, make everyone safer.”

“Every sword has two edges.” Fedorov nodded philosophically.

“Get him, Maxim.”

After Fedorov left, Mosin remained in the office, looking at the presentation on his desk, lost in thought. He drummed his fingers on the table, made up his mind, and reached for the “red phone” as it had been known since the days of the previous Cold War.

“President Maxwell?”

“Hi, Boris. Call me Joe for old times’ sake.”

“How are you, Joe?”

“OK. As you know, we had a presidential candidate assassinated. Second time in four years.”

“I’m sorry, Joe.”

“Some people say the Chinese did it, some people say the Russians...”

“We had nothing to do with this, Joe. I doubt that the Chinese did either.”

“Well, four years ago you had quite a bit to do with the Williams’ assassination.”

“Joe, I’m not saying we had anything to do with that one, but even if we did, it would have been a certain head of the GRU acting on his own...”

“Oh, please, spare me the official version!”

“Look, Joe, I’m sorry about Jeff Kron, but that’s not why I am calling.”

“Why are you calling then?”

“Joe, this will never make the news, but there was a putsch attempt here, in Moscow.”

“What?” Maxwell sounded genuinely surprised. Mosin didn’t think that the Americans had any involvement in the attempted coup, but it was still nice to have the indirect confirmation.

“Yes. Our old nemesis, Nikolai Nemzhov, blackmailed some high-level people into supporting him. You see, for years he’s been using the state’s surveillance apparatus to collect the data he can use to pressure people. Everyone has something to hide.”

“Did they come close?”

“Very close. We were lucky. And so were you.”

“Why were we lucky?”

“Well, Joe, we are not friends. We’ve been enemies for years. But at least we never crossed the line from ‘cold’ to ‘hot’ war.”

“I’d say you guys came pretty close to crossing that line five years ago when you tried to destroy us with your attack on the dollar.”

“Joe, you did the same to us ten years ago. My point is, we’ve never reached for the missile codes; we’ve never gone ‘all in’, so to speak. If Nemzhov were to come to power here, it could have been different. But there is something else.”

“What?”

“It looks like Nemzhov’s game was not limited to Russia. I just sat through a forensic accounting presentation that was anything but boring. Some accounts established over twenty years ago have been used to funnel money to certain parties in your country.”

“Like what?”

“Like John Dimon. Like FreedomShield. I am sure that Nemzhov was using your inability to see into the SOFI financial network to fund them.”

Maxwell breathed heavily on the other end.

“Boris, why are you telling me this? Why should I trust you?”

Mosin hesitated.

“Frankly, Joe, I was wondering whether I should keep this to myself; I could control Dimon when he came to power. But I’m not sure I would be able to manage him. That’s one thing I have learned in my many years in the office: don’t assume you can control everything. People are unpredictable, the world is complex. I’m getting old. I want to retire next year. I’ve been watching Dimon. I am afraid to leave the world to people like him.”

Maxwell remained silent.

“OK, Joe, I will send you what I have. You decide what to do with it.”

*Santa Ana, California, USA*

It was another nondescript house in a working-class neighborhood. They arrived here in an old car under the cover of darkness. The old Mexican couple greeted them warmly and gave them two rooms in the back. David and Maggie took one room, Oleg, Alejandro and Mike crowded into the other. They hadn't left the place in two days.

"Our faces are probably in all the surveillance systems by now," said Alejandro glumly. "We won't be able to go to a supermarket without raising an alarm somewhere."

"How are we going to get out of this?" asked Oleg.

"Let things die down a bit. With Jeff Kron's assassination, everyone's on the lookout. Then we'll leave at night, go across the border."

"Do you know anything about Jennifer?" asked Maggie. "I can't help but think that we brought this on her."

"You don't know that," said David, his voice lacking conviction.

"We bring death wherever we go." Maggie started crying.

Everyone else sat quietly for a few minutes.

Alejandro finally spoke. "Look, I don't think we can contact Jennifer now. We know that she survived; according to the news reports she was in Laguna Beach with her grandfather. She probably talked to him about us—that was the plan. I'll get a word to him, with a way to contact us."

"How are you going to do that?"

"They probably use gardeners. Everyone in Orange County does."

"And in the meantime, we just sit here?" said David.

"Yes, we have to remain patient."

*Washington, D.C., USA*

President Maxwell saw Sam Baker to the door, then came back and looked again at the thin folder that the retired congressman left behind.

“Joe, do you think it’s true?” asked Brian Tice.

Maxwell looked at his VP and the underdog presidential candidate. *The man is so transparent, fear and greed imprinted on his face. Jeff Kron’s assassination scrambled the presidential race. If Dimon can be discredited, this puts Tice into the driver’s seat. But if the accusation is false, it’s the presidential office—and, by extension, Tice—that gets discredited. And in any case, this will bring up some unwanted scrutiny to the issue they’ve been trying to bury. And Brian’s nose might not be clean.*

“Possibly. I received a call from the Russian President Mosin last night.”

“Why?”

“In Moscow, there was a plot to overthrow him and install a new government. It went pretty far, but thankfully they were able to break it up.”

“Why ‘thankfully’? Mosin has been our enemy for a long time.”

“Mosin and I don’t like each other. He is not our friend by any means. But there can be things much worse than a trustworthy enemy.”

“Like what?”

“Like someone who is ready to take the conflict to the next level. From cold war to hot war. No, Mosin is no gift to humanity. But someone worse was waiting in the wings.”

“Who?”

“Nemzhov, former head of the GRU. The same one that Sam Baker brought up. Turns out that Nemzhov had an extensive dossier on a great many people. I’m sure you and I are there as well. The dossier has disappeared with Nemzhov. We don’t know who will be the next person that Nemzhov will blackmail... or is already blackmailing. And FreedomShield’s involvement is disturbing, to say the least.”

Maxwell watched as Tice shifted uncomfortably in his chair. *He doesn't like the mentioning of FreedomShield. He lobbied for them to get the FBI contract. I actually enjoy seeing him squirm*, the president thought.

“Well, aren't the Russians going to get Nemzhov?”

“They're trying. Mosin thinks Nemzhov is in the country. But even if they do, the information won't disappear.”

“OK, what does this have to do with Dimon?”

“Mosin told me the same thing as Sam Baker—they believe that Dimon is 'dirty.' He just wanted to warn me.”

“Why?”

“Because just like me, Mosin is afraid that someone worse than Joe Maxwell will come to power.”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Tice.

“I'll have to think about it.”

Tice hesitated.

“There is something else.” Maxwell did not react, so Tice continued. “The FBI intercepted phone conversations where Dimon was instructing FreedomShield to attack Kron's supporters.”

“And how do you, Brian, know about this?”

“Director Miller told me.”

“And who told Director Miller to illegally wiretap Dimon? Come on, Brian, I can just pick up the phone and call him.”

Tice exhaled.

“I did. These people come out of nowhere. We have the right to know more about them.”

“You have no right to break the law,” Maxwell replied curtly.

Tice grunted and left.

Maxwell opened the sheet of paper with the names, numbers, and dates. *I must try to stop Dimon. And FreedomShield. What will be the implications?*

*Richmond, USA*

Tension hung heavily in the air.

“Can they tie the Los Angeles events to us?” Erik King habitually paced the floor of his office.

“Not directly. At least, not yet. The drones used in the Torrance attack were not purchased by us, they came through third parties,” replied Blair White.

“How much time does this buy us?”

“A few days, weeks at the most.”

“OK, that’s good. We have access to the databases, we can modify some of the purchasing orders, create false trails...”

“No, we can’t!” Nancy Westlake protested.

“Why? Don’t you realize what’s at stake here?” screamed King.

“I think I finally do,” Nancy spit out. “But in any case, as of twenty minutes ago all FreedomShield employees lost their access privileges to the government databases. I verified this myself—my login no longer works. Also, I’m getting notices that our people are being taken in for questioning as they show up for work.”

“By whose authority?”

“I’ve been told the orders came directly from the White House.” Nancy shrugged.

The intercom buzzed. King punched it irritably.

“I told you to hold my calls!”

“Mr. King, I’m sorry, but there are some gentlemen here and they say they have a warrant.”

*Denver, USA*

“Look at these people!” John Dimon pointed at the TV projection showing massive demonstrations. “I understand they’re not happy over their leader dying, but blocking government buildings? Stopping traffic? Refusing to go to work? That’s just ridiculous!”

“Well, they are upset,” allowed Chris Bigelow.

“Yeah, well, bringing the economy to a standstill is not the way to address their grievances.” Dimon shook his finger at Bigelow, as if the man were guilty of organizing the protests. “When I’m the president, I’ll deal with this kind of stuff appropriately. I’ll call up the National Guard and restore law and order!”

Dimon took a gulp of bourbon, calmed down a bit and turned to his other campaign advisor, Jonathan Morton.

“Speaking of the presidency, how are we doing? I presume with this unfortunate death of Jeff Kron, I’m firmly the lead dog, right?”

“It’s likely the case,” Morton said, sounding very careful, “but you should understand that traumatic events like this tend to rewrite the script.”

“What the hell are you trying to say?” bellowed Dimon.

“You see, about a quarter of the electorate was pro-Kron and we simply don’t know which way they’ll swing.” Morton pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “It’s fair to assume that it’s between you and Tice now.”

“Why in God’s name would these voters go to Tice when you kept telling me all along that this is the year of the protest vote, against the status quo, against the establishment? I am the only non-establishment candidate standing now!” Dimon’s face was getting bright red.

“Well, John, you and Kron were quite different. Different types of dissent, so to speak. I wouldn’t just assume that his voters will come to your side. Besides, there is this *Cui Bono* question hanging in the air—who benefited from Kron’s assassination...”

“Don’t give me this crap. I didn’t kill him!” shouted Dimon.

“Of course not, but as long as the matter is not resolved, suspicion hangs in the air. And these demonstrations, well, they just feed the flames.”

Dimon turned to Bob Johnson.

“Your FreedomShield guys know how to deal with riots. Can you put a plan together to start breaking this up?” Dimon pointed at the TV projection still showing huge crowds protesting.

“Mr. Dimon, I’m afraid not. I just got the news a few minutes ago that FreedomShield’s headquarters in Richmond are being raided by federal agents. I am to continue providing security services with the personnel I have here, but nothing else.”

“Your offices are being raided?” Dimon looked stunned.

Morton and Bigelow exchanged glances, then Morton carefully offered, “Perhaps under the circumstances, it would be best if we decline FreedomShield’s services and accept the earlier offer of protection from the Security Service? John? ...John?”

Dimon seemed shocked, repeating, “Offices are being raided?”

They were interrupted by a careful knock on the door.

After Dimon failed to react, Bigelow called out, “Yes, come in.”

A pretty young secretary waltzed in with a smile.

“Mr. Dimon, there are some gentlemen here and they say they have to talk to you.”

*New York, USA*

“It’s your damn fault, Bryce!” The man with an aged movie star appearance shook his finger. “We should have just stayed with Tice like I was planning to.”

“Bullshit!” retorted an elderly man in jeans and cowboy boots. “When Tice was in third place, you, Jim, were just as anxious to dump him as any of us.”

“Calm down, you two!” interrupted George, breathing heavily. “What are we going to do now that Dimon’s been arrested? Anybody know where Sheila is?”

“Not returning any calls.” Bryce shrugged. “I think we should crawl back to Tice, beg his forgiveness.”

“I’m not sure Tice needs you now.” A static-riddled voice came from a holographic 3-D image of the hedge fund man. “Kron is gone, Dimon is gone. Who’s going to stand in his way?”

“And where are you, hedge fund boy? Busy with your ‘activities’ again?” Bryce scowled.

“No, gentlemen. I have a nice big farm in a remote area of New Zealand. With my own airstrip and all. I think I’ll just stay here until things blow over.”

“You little pussy, worried about a few protesters,” said George dismissively. “The rabble will disperse as they always do. Everything will be fine.”

“OK, George, if you say so. Things are fine until they stop being fine. And I’d rather not be around at that time. Good luck to you!”

The holographic image disappeared.

“Well, that leaves the three of us. Three out of six.” Bryce sounded philosophical.

“So, are we going back to Tice?”

“What choice do we have?” Jim the ‘movie star’ shrugged. “His approval ratings are pretty low, so he can use our money to pump himself up.”

“OK, ten million again?” George sighed.

“With only three of us, we’ll have to double it.”

*Moscow, Russia*

“He is downstairs, Mr. President,” Maxim Fedorov reported.

“How did you get him?”

“He was in one of the locations that his assistant Primak gave us. Nemzhov had a gun but didn’t try using it.”

“Are you making any progress in decoding his electronic archives?” asked Mosin.

“Some, but it’s slow going. Primak doesn’t know everything.”

“Thank you, Maxim. Now take me to see him.”

They walked down to a room deep in the basement, multiple sentries clicking their heels to attention along the way. There were four guards in front of the room.

“You look good, Nikolai.” Mosin sat down across from Nemzhov. “Nice tan, nice suit. You must have gotten some rest over the last two years.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.” Nemzhov seemed relaxed, a well-dressed man in his sixties, looking dapper but needing a shave. “Perhaps you can get your people remove the handcuffs? You have four armed guards for one old handcuffed man.”

“Sorry, Nikolai, but given what you tried to pull off, no precaution seems to be extreme. How did you manage to get so many top military people on your side?”

“All of them had something to hide in their background. You don’t get to a position of power without doing things you wouldn’t want others to find out. And once you get there, you don’t want to leave. As you know, Boris.”

“I know,” agreed Mosin. “You could have tried to work with me instead of running.”

“Please, Boris. Be honest. You were going to throw me to the wolves back in 2022 when these two amateurs, Ferguson and Sappin, blew our scheme. I wasn’t going to be the fall guy.”

“I would have thrown you to the wolves,” agreed Mosin. “How could you let these two nobodies fool you?”

“I made a mistake,” Nemzhov said. “I was sure I could control them and then take care of them when the time was right. I offered good money for their silence, figured they were going to milk this for

a while. I just needed a bit of time to make sure I neutralized them. I didn't expect them to expose everything."

"Well, as you know, Nikolai, there is no room for mistakes in this business."

"That might be, Boris, that might be. Except that you need me." Nemzhov smiled.

"Why would you say that?" Mosin smiled back.

"Because you're probably not having much success decoding my files."

"Your assistant Primak is working with us."

"Primak?" Nemzhov laughed. "Arkady was my guy for blackmail work and he knows a few things. I gave him a reputation as a computer genius, but that's just hot air. The real computer geniuses behind the system are gone. As in dead."

"We can figure it out, Nikolai. We'll put our best programmers on it."

"In time, perhaps you will. But the value of information declines as time goes on. I know you, Boris. Why would you take a chance when you can have a sure thing?"

"What do you want, Nikolai? You know that to the outside world, you must be dead." Mosin leaned forward, his pale eyes squinting.

"Of course, Boris. I've lost. I will never be officially in the public eye, but I still like to have that feeling of power and control. I'll live in secret; I will enjoy my luxuries in private. It's a cheap price for you to pay for the information and help that I will provide."

Maxim Fedorov was waiting for Mosin just outside the room.

"Mr. President, should we eliminate him?"

"No, Maxim, we need him still."

*Washington, D.C., USA*

“What are you going to do about this?” Brian Tice pointed out the window of the Oval Office at thousands of people occupying the square. “Kron’s supporters have brought this country to a standstill!”

“And what do you think I should do?” replied President Maxwell. “Are they not within their constitutional rights?”

“Every day this is going on, the economy is losing over thirty billion dollars,” Tice protested. “This has been going on for a week now. They are hurting everyone. They are weakening the country. They are criminals!”

“Brian, they are not criminals,” asserted Maxwell. “Again, what would you have me do?”

“Send the army and break this up! You have the authority. How are we going to run the country otherwise? How are we going to have the elections?”

President Maxwell leaned on the table, looking directly at Tice.

“You are asking me to send armed troops against tens of millions of protesters? No president has done this. Do you realize that if we do that, somewhere—probably in many places—shots will end up being fired?”

“Joe, what’s more important? A few malcontents or the well-being of the whole country?”

Maxwell carefully enunciated every word.

“Brian, I will not be known as the president that sent the army against peaceful protesters!”

“Then you don’t have the spine to run the country!”

“Get the hell out of my office!” bellowed Maxwell. An angry Vice President stormed out.

Maxwell turned to the other person in the room, his Chief of Staff, Greta Nulon.

“Dimon’s support collapsed after the revelations of shady dealings. Greta, Tice is now the leading presidential candidate. Would you trust him to run the country?”

“Joe, I wouldn’t trust him to take my dog for a walk.” Greta shook her head. “But what are you going to do? With both Kron and

Dimon gone—and may I say so, thank God in Dimon’s case!— who is there to stop him?”

“Yes. That’s a bit of a dilemma, don’t you think?”

“I’m glad I don’t have your job, Mr. President.”

Maxwell got up, walked over to the window, stood there looking at the protesters outside.

“Greta, how long have you been with me?”

“Twenty-eight years, Mr. President. A long time. You were a young congressman when we met. There was hardly any gray in your hair.” Nulon smiled.

“Yes, a long time. Four years ago, when Mitchell Williams ran against me and was assassinated, I wanted to quit.”

“I know you wanted to, but who could have stepped in at the time?”

“That almost tore the country apart. We barely managed to hold things together. I wonder if the Kron’s assassination and Dimon’s disgrace will prove to be too much to overcome.”

“It’s possible,” agreed Nulon. “Especially with someone as heavy-handed as Tice.”

“How did we get to this point?” whispered Maxwell. “I had only good intentions. I served honestly.”

“I know you did, Mr. President. I think we all kept kicking the can down the road, hoping that it would just disappear somehow. But the can kept growing bigger and bigger, and the road came to an end.”

After Greta left, Maxwell stood by the window looking at the protesters. “No Taxation Without Representation!” placards were everywhere. *I had to stop Dimon. Problem is, Tice isn’t that much better. Brother fighting brother, Americans against other Americans. What to do?*

Maxwell sat back at the desk and pressed the intercom button.

“Get me Sam Baker, please!”

*Beijing, China*

“Good morning, Comrade General Secretary!” General Cao greeted him as he was shown into the room. He was unpleasantly surprised to see that Sun Yang was there too, but he hid his disappointment.

“Ah, General, please come in.” Kai Liu greeted him. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Cao.

After taking a polite sip, Cao pointed to the thick folder he brought with him.

“I presumed Comrade Liu wanted a report on how our preparations are going?”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.” Kai Liu waved off the offer. “That’s not what we called you in for.”

General Cao stammered, “Forgive my surprise. What can I do for you?”

“Well, General Cao, I had an interesting conversation with the Russian President Mosin. And he sent me this intriguing document.” Kai Liu put his hand on the paper in front of him.

“What document?”

But Kai Liu ignored the question.

“General Cao, did you know about the planned coup in Moscow?”

Cao hesitated and immediately realized that he gave himself away.

“Comrade General Secretary, I’ve heard rumors that some of the high-level people in Moscow thought that Mosin was timid, that he was going to allow the Americans to rebuild their strengths, that he lost his nerve so to speak...”

“General Cao, I think you’ve heard more than that!” Sun Yang impolitely interrupted their conversation.

“Why would Comrade Yang say something like this?” Cao exclaimed, still talking to Liu.

“Because you told people in the General Staff that there would be a change in the Russian policy before the end of the month! How could you be so stupid?” shouted Yang. “This saying of yours made

its way to Mosin and he now believes that we, the Chinese, supported a coup against him!”

“Let’s not exaggerate,” Kai Liu said, raising his palm to calm his colleague. “President Mosin does not think that we plotted against him. He does, however, believe that certain people in China knew about the plot. It took some effort on my part to persuade him that I knew nothing about this and that our government was in no way involved with the coup attempt.”

“Does this mean that the Russians now won’t support our plans for Taiwan?” whispered Cao.

“Yes. Under the circumstances, Mosin will most definitely not support our plans,” replied Kai Liu. “And that’s a good thing. Because the man that you counted on, Nikolai Nemzhov, would have let us and the Americans fight it out, and bleed ourselves to death, while he was going to move west, occupying Eastern Europe.”

“That’s impossible!” shouted Cao.

“Oh, it was not only possible, it was definite. Nemzhov was planning all along to lead us into the war and betray us. The Americans weren’t going to fight the war on two fronts. They were going to let him have Europe and he was going to let them crush us. He already had a deal with John Dimon. That’s why we were supposed to wait until Dimon came into the office. Who exactly came up with the idea of attacking Taiwan on the day of the American presidential inauguration?”

“It was Admiral Kaiping Li,” whispered Cao.

“Of course.” Sun Yang snorted. “Another traitor.”

“I am not a traitor!” protested Cao. “Whatever I did, I did for the glory of Greater China!”

“And how about the glory of your bank accounts?” retorted Kai Liu angrily. He pushed the piece of paper he had his hand towards Cao. “President Mosin’s people did some forensic accounting of the SOFI transactions. Seems that you profited quite nicely back in 2019. And of course we always knew that you’ve taken tens of millions in bribes over the past fifteen years.”

“Please forgive me,” Cao uttered faintly.

“Well, General, I can forgive bribe-taking and corruption as long as it’s outside of the public eye. What I can’t forgive is bad judgment.

You have almost gotten us into a disastrous war because you let someone blackmail you. For that, you'll have to pay."

"How? I'll do anything!"

"Thank you, I appreciate your loyalty to the Party in this matter. The situation in the country is tense, people are angry. Since we now can't direct their anger against the Americans, we will do some show trials to demonstrate that we are tough on crime, even when it happens at the highest echelons of power. You and Admiral Li will be arrested and tried for bribery and corruption. You will publicly confess, and you will make the proper statements. In exchange, you will be allowed to live and your family will be treated well."

Kai Liu got up, signaling that the meeting was over.

"Thank you, Comrade General Secretary," whispered General Cao.

*Laguna Beach, CA*

It was time to go, before they started worrying. Jennifer took one more look at the rocky part of Emerald Bay Cove across the water. She wore large sunglasses and a hat, craving solitude and anonymity. The Secret Service didn't know whether they were still supposed to protect her or not. She told them to leave.

Tom, the one that grew close to them, asked, "Mrs. Kron, let us stay. You may still need us."

There was guilt in his eyes, in his posture. The innocent guilt of not being able to save Jeff. She shook her head. "No."

How did it all come to be? A chain of random events stretching over eighteen years: her father somehow having a role in Jeff's release, Jeff coming to thank her, accidental involvement in politics that grew into a movement... And now he's gone. Just like that. A few days ago she said goodbye, and that was it. Why didn't she stay with him? Better yet, why didn't she insist that he come with her? She was angry at him, so angry... The people from the movement wanted something from her. They were looking up to her as if she was the one with the answers. Jennifer turned off her phone so she didn't have to talk to them.

Yes, time to go. Her mother, her grandfather, her daughter, they were all waiting. They needed her. Her daughter needed her. She made her way to the car and unthinkingly drove to Sam Baker's house on Ocean Way. An unfamiliar car was parked in the driveway. Damn, she didn't want to see anyone.

Wondering who the visitors might be, Jennifer made her way to the familiar patio overlooking Woods Cove. Nana and Karen were busily talking to four people, three of whom she immediately recognized as Oleg, Maggie, and David. She ran towards them.

"You are OK! Oh my God, what are you doing here? I thought you would be in hiding!"

"There's no need for them to hide now." Sam Baker came from the direction of the house. He walked straighter and with more

authority than only a few days ago, as if being active helped him shed a few years. “The dogs have been called off, so to speak.”

“I am so sorry about your husband,” Oleg, who was the nearest, squeezed Jennifer in a bear hug. David shook his head, swallowed hard, and held her for a good minute. Maggie and Jennifer stood looking at each other for a few seconds, then burst into tears as they embraced. The fourth person, a handsome, dark-skinned, dark haired man with a goatee introduced himself as Alejandro and expressed his sorrow.

“Alejandro has been hiding us and helping to arrange everything,” Maggie explained.

“Grandpa, what do you mean by dogs being called off?” asked Jennifer. “Who can possibly do that?”

“The President of the United States, for one.” Sam Baker smiled. “He can do that.”

“This is wonderful!” Jennifer clapped her hands. “But how did you manage to do that? Did you just pick up the phone and call him?”

“No, as a matter of fact, he called me,” replied Sam, an edge of pride in his tone.

“Really? What did he want?”

“I’ll explain in due time. It’s going to get dark soon and your mother worked hard on today’s dinner.”

“Well, Nana helped me, so it was really the two of us making this dinner. We’ll share the credit... or the blame.” Karen laughed. “The table’s been set, let’s eat.”

By the time dessert had been served, it was well past seven and the sun was half-dipped into the ocean. Nana turned on the lights.

“Jennifer, there is something I must talk to you about,” Sam Baker said.

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“I don’t know how to begin so I’ll just jump right into it.” Sam made a chopping movement with his hand. “Jennifer, you should run in Jeff’s place!”

“What? What are you talking about?” She recoiled. “I can’t. What have I done to be qualified? My husband has just been killed; can’t I have my time to grieve?”

“I am sorry to ask you, sweetheart.” Sam hung his head. “I know it’s very hard for you now. I know it’s a terrible time to ask. But the elections are only three months away, your party is on the ballot with no nominee, and Brian Tice is going to walk away with it all. Everything that Jeff and you worked for will be lost.”

“Can’t someone else run? Why does it have to be me? I’m in so much pain!” Jennifer started to sob.

“Sweetheart, I am so sorry to put this burden on you,” Sam whispered after a minute. “I wish there was someone else. But you are the only one in the Reform Party that has the name recognition. People like you. If you don’t do this, no one will.”

“I’m new, and Tice is the Vice President. I can’t possibly beat him,” Jennifer protested through the tears. “People followed Jeff, not me. And Robert, his campaign manager, is also dead.”

“You can beat him, sweetheart. I will help. And there is someone a lot more important than me who wants to help you.”

“Who?”

“President Maxwell,” Sam calmly replied.

People around the table involuntarily exclaimed, “Maxwell?”

“Yes,” Sam confirmed. “That’s why he called here. He wanted me to convince you to run.”

“Is that how you got us in the clear?” asked Maggie.

“Yes, that was my price. He offered you the Secret Service protection. You can adopt new identities, go live where you want to. Your records will be erased. You’re free.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” Maggie threw her arms around Sam and started crying. David and Oleg hugged. Handsome Alejandro was the only one who didn’t look so happy.

“It’s my evening to bring attractive women to tears,” joked Sam, then grew serious again. “Jennifer, Maxwell will endorse you if you run.”

“What?”

“Yes. He’ll break party ranks. He believes that Tice will be bad for the country. He believes we need a fundamentally new leadership. He saw you. He believes in you, Jennifer.”

Jennifer got up and walked away from the table. She stood at the railing, looking at the dark red sky, breathing heavily. A friendly arm wrapped around her shoulder. Jennifer looked to the side to see Maggie.

“Your father’s name was Pavel,” Maggie stated, not asked.

“Yes.”

“Your father saved Jeff. Fourteen years ago way back in Kiev, a boy named Pavel saved me. It’s like we were on parallel paths. This is a coincidence, of course, with no special meaning. It’s just that that boy saved me and years later, thinking of his sacrifice—and the sacrifices of others—I decided to publish the Schulmann file, to give people knowledge, give them justice. David and I came back because the task hadn’t been completed.”

“Have you been paying back the debt?” whispered Jennifer.

“Yes, I have. Many people willingly helped us despite danger, often at the cost of their lives. The people that protected us two years ago as we were looking for the Schulmann file—most of them died. The man who a few days ago got us the detailed data about Dimon and FreedomShield, the data that we passed on to you—he is probably dead. I can never fully repay that. I can only gather my courage and keep on fighting.”

“Are you saying I should run?”

“Yes, you should. Perhaps it’s your destiny. I want to believe the world is not random because we, the people, pay forward our debts. Your husband paid the debt he thought he owed to your father. He built something special. Now, it’s in your hands. You must be brave.”

“I never asked for this.”

“I know. I never asked to be a fugitive either. I’m just a regular person. But that’s what happened.”

Jennifer turned and hugged Maggie. They stood like this seemingly forever, holding on to each other until Jennifer let go.

“What are you and David going to do?” she asked.

“We’ve been running for over two years,” whispered Maggie.  
“I’m tired of running. I think I’ve paid most of my debts. Now, I  
want peace. And a child.”

**FEBRUARY 2025**

*St. Petersburg, Russia*

At ten in the morning, the sun just rose over the horizon, its cold rays peeking through the clouds but barely warming the awaiting crowd. With the temperature right around the freezing point, the falling snow felt wet and heavy.

As the Air Force One taxied to a stop, the choreographed preparations kicked into full gear. President Mosin waited at the bottom of the ramp.

“Mrs. President, welcome to St. Petersburg. It’s been over fifteen years since the U.S. President came to Russia.”

“Thank you. Hopefully, it’s a start of more frequent visits between the leadership of our countries,” replied Jennifer Rostin-Kron.

They posed for the mandatory pictures, an old man in his seventies and a young woman half his age.

In the car, the conversation turned less formal.

“This is your second visit to St. Petersburg, Mrs. President,” stated Mosin.

“Yes, my father brought us here when I was a little girl. I’m still getting used to my title. Please call me Jennifer.”

“Only if you call me Boris.” Mosin smiled. “Congratulations on becoming both the youngest and the first woman U.S. president ever. Your election was a bit of a surprise to many.”

“Thank you. I just made it, age-wise, by a couple of years.” Jennifer smiled, then grew serious. “Of course, I only ended up running because my husband was assassinated.”

“Please accept my condolences again, this time in person.”

“Thank you. And thank you for your role in my election.”

“My role?”

“You phoned President Maxwell and warned him about Dimon and FreedomShield.”

“I believe President Maxwell had other sources as well.”

“He did. It was courageous of him to first take down Dimon and then endorse me rather than his Vice President.”

Mosin nodded. “We had many differences, but I always respected President Maxwell.”

“Do you know who gave the order to kill my husband?” Jennifer’s voice turned as cold as the weather outside.

“It was Nemzhov. He controlled Dimon and FreedomShield and didn’t want to take any chances of Dimon not winning the elections.”

“Did Dimon know?”

“He may have suspected that your husband would be ‘taken care of,’ so to speak, but I don’t believe he knew the details. The attack on your home was done by FreedomShield. As you know.”

Jennifer inhaled hard, her hands folding into fists.

“What happened to Nemzhov?”

“He’s been eliminated,” Mosin lied. “He was hiding near Moscow, ready to step in when his putsch succeeded. After the plot failed, he tried running, but he was cornered. I wish we could have taken him alive, to face justice.”

They rode in silence for a minute, then Mosin spoke again.

“Jennifer, one more thing. In Nemzhov’s files we found a mention of your father, Pavel Rostin.”

“My father didn’t kill himself, did he?”

“No. He stumbled on the evidence of a certain plot that Nemzhov was behind. Nemzhov had him killed.”

“This man has destroyed my family. My father, my husband ... And that plot, did it have anything to do with the crisis of 2019?”

Mosin hesitated, then nodded.

“Eventually. Obviously, there were many changes that took place between your father’s death in 2006 and the crisis of 2019, but many of the seeds had been planted then.”

“So, as the Russian President, you bear an indirect responsibility for the deaths of my father and my husband?” the words came cold and hard.

Mosin shrank back from the unexpected anger in Jennifer’s voice.

“Mrs. President, being in a position of power means bearing indirect responsibility for many, many things. I deeply regret the deaths of your loved ones. But the financial warfare between our

countries... your side is as guilty as ours. Probably more so. And while this war is not conducted with bullets, there are victims. There are always victims.”

The car came to a halt.

“Piskariovskoye Memorial Cemetery, as you requested for your first stop,” Mosin announced.

The two presidents and their escorts walked by the eternal flame and by the mounds of mass graves in silence, Beethoven’s music playing. The guides directed them to the left just before reaching the sculpture of the Motherland. The snow had been cleared around one grave in a birch grove.

“Your grandfather’s grave,” said Mosin simply.

Jennifer stood in silence before a simple stone that read: “Vladimir Rostin, 1924 – 2006.” She then turned to her secretary.

“Robert, the diary please.”

The secretary gave her a notebook that she handed to Mosin.

“Mr. President... Boris, this is a copy of my grandfather’s diary. He kept this during the Leningrad blockade. My father brought it from St. Petersburg in 2006, just before he was killed. Jeff and I turned to this diary often, as a reminder of courage and sacrifice... and the horrors of war.”

“Thank you, Mrs. President,” replied Mosin, clearly moved. “At least we averted the war this time.”

“But we came close, didn’t we?”

“We did. We came very close. If not for a few courageous people, Nemzhov’s coup in Moscow would have succeeded. Then a bellicose Dimon would have taken power in your country and the leaders in Beijing would have started a war. Who knows how many millions would have died. It seems like every hundred years or so the world erupts in deadly wars. I hope we have broken this cycle.”

“I guess it depends, Mr. President,” Jennifer responded.

“Extreme inequality, financial warfare, oligarchies, decay of democratic institutions—they all lead to discontent, to the rise of the Nemzhovs and Dimons of our world. We—you, I, other leaders—have a responsibility to our people.”

Jennifer turned around to leave. Mosin hesitated, fell a few steps behind. “Talk is cheap. Let’s see how you handle the power,” the old man whispered under his breath.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” Jennifer looked back.

“Only that power is a mighty drug. As you’ll find out.”

## *Lahaina, USA*

Aulani liked their new neighbors, a quiet couple that moved into a small house on their cul-de-sac near Lahainaluna Farm back in October. She was the first person on the street to greet them, as they were just starting to unload the rental minivan.

“Hi, I’m Aulani. I live there.” She pointed to the house across the street.

“Hi, Aulani, nice to meet you. I’m Ann,” the woman said, extending her hand for a handshake, “and this is my husband, Mark. How old are you?”

Ann looked really old, even older than Aulani’s mom, and Aulani’s mom was already thirty. Aulani knew that because they had her mom’s birthday party only two months ago. Many people came—even Aulani’s father, who now lived with his other family in Kahului on the other side of the island. Aulani liked how Ann looked and dressed: short blond hair with red streaks in it, beautiful open smile, big gray eyes, and a light skin not yet darkened by Hawaiian sun. She was dressed simple and elegant, in a white patterned shirt and dark blue slacks.

“I’m already seven,” Aulani declared proudly. “I go to the Princess Nahienaena Elementary School. It’s three blocks away and I walk there all by myself.”

“Well, you are a big girl.” Ann smiled. Her husband, Mark, stopped unloading the van and looked at Aulani. He was even older than Ann, hair already greying, posture slightly stooped. But Mark’s eyes were very kind and Aulani immediately liked him.

“Are you here for a vacation?” asked Aulani. She knew that most people came to Maui for vacation, but their street was poor and far away from the beach. As a matter of fact, no vacationers ever came here.

“No, we’re going to live here,” replied Ann.

That made Aulani happy. Then Aulani’s mother came out and told her to stop bothering people that had work to do.

But Aulani came to visit the new neighbors the next day... and the next... and the one after that. Ann and Mark always seemed happy

to see her. They settled in, bought furniture and a used car. Aulani couldn't figure out what they did, spending much of their day with computers and books. Aulani's mother got used to the new neighbors. Actually, she found them very convenient as free babysitters and tutors, which helped on a cashier's salary, especially since the child custody checks from Aulani's father didn't always show up. That's how it came about that Aulani was spending more and more of her time at the house across the street. Aulani thought it a bit strange that Ann was helping her with math while Mark helped with English; she thought it should have been the other way around. But then, they were a bit strange. Nice, but different. Their strangeness came across in the way they looked at each other as if not believing they were here, in the way they gently touched each other as if each was made of porcelain.

Sometimes Ann and Mark took Aulani to the beach. Usually, it was a bit of a routine: they would drive a few minutes north on Honoapiilani Highway, turn left onto Kaanapali Parkway and park at the Whaler's Village, then slowly walk up the Kaanapali Beach to the Black Rock. Then, in some strange ritual, Ann and Mark would sit on the edge of the Black Rock for some time with Mark's arm around Ann's shoulders, while Aulani would be allowed to crawl around. But they would always buy Aulani ice cream, so as far as she was concerned they could be strange to their hearts' content.

Today, they went to the Black Rock again. But there was a slight change: they were holding each other much tighter, with Mark's right arm around Ann's shoulder squeezing her into his side, while his left hand was gently massaging her stomach.

*Well, they are a bit weird, but they're harmless, typical haole,* thought Aulani while finishing her chocolate vanilla ice cream.

After Aulani's mother called her for dinner, David turned to Maggie.

"Did you feel him kicking tonight?"

"Not in the last couple of hours," replied Maggie. Seeing a worried expression on David's face, she laughed.

“Oh, don’t be silly! It’s been only four months. Don’t worry, your son is moving. I have a sense he’ll be a troublemaker.”

“Of course, if he takes after his mother!” David laughed.

They went into the backyard of their small house. This was the reason they rented it: one could see the ocean from here. The sun was setting into the water.

“Listen to the silence,” said Maggie. “Listen to the quiet.”

David sat next to her and lowered his head into Maggie’s lap while hugging her.

“I am happy,” he said. “I am content.”

“You can relax now,” she said, moving her fingers through his greying hair. “I will guard your rest. Your son will arrive in time.”

## **COMMENTARY**

The people described in this book are fictional. But most of the historical events and characters have been reproduced faithfully. This *Commentary* is intended to help the reader distinguish between fact and fiction.

## **Cryptocurrency**

In the story, the “sharing economy” operates on the foundation of a cryptocurrency called “D-coin.” It is modeled on the bitcoin and other blockchain-based cryptocurrencies currently in existence, such as XRP, nextcoin, mastercoin, bitshares, etc. One can debate the pros and cons of such systems and their potential, especially given the rather colorful history of bitcoin. But it is certain that blockchain-based systems provide decentralized trust and anonymity, can operate outside of the government’s oversight, and have no central point of vulnerability. Such systems can enable direct person-to-person exchanges, bypassing the banking middlemen. As such, they are arguably a powerful building block for an “alternative” economy.

It is not my intent to dive into gory details of blockchain technology. For those interested, *The Age of Cryptocurrency: How Bitcoin and Digital Money Are Challenging the Global Economic Order* by Paul Vigna and Michael Casey is a good introduction. Numerous startups and significant investments into blockchain systems make it likely that cryptocurrencies may indeed become one of the disruptive technologies a few years down the road.

## **Is America an Oligarchy?**

This was one of many such headlines after a published study “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizen” by Martin Gilens from Princeton and Benjamin Page from Northwestern.

The study did prove what many already knew: money talks; elites have a disproportionate influence in Washington and dictate policies that do not necessarily benefit the majority.

To quote:

“The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence .... When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organized interests, they generally lose.”

They have also found that the positions of powerful special interests groups are usually different from the preferences of average citizens. It’s a small group of very high income individuals that shape our policies—to their benefit. This is what Gilens and Page called “Economic Elite Domination.”

Does this make us an oligarchy? The definition of oligarchy is “a form of government in which power is vested in a few persons or in a dominant class.” If we aren’t there, then we are close. Not sure we even needed a scientific study to prove it, but here it is:

[http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens\\_and\\_page\\_2014\\_-\\_testing\\_theories\\_of\\_american\\_politics.doc.pdf](http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_-_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf)

## **Alternatives to Western Economic and Financial Systems**

The story referred to SOFI (Russian Equivalent of SWIFT) and a Shanghai-based New Development Bank (NDB). As of the time of writing, these initiatives are in progress.

The NDB was formed in 2014 by China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa, with \$100 billion in capital. It is based in Shanghai and is scheduled to start operating in 2016.

In 2014, some of the Western powers threatened to cut off Russia from the SWIFT banking transaction system.<sup>1</sup> During the same year, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) launched a new SWIFT-style payment service aimed at moving away from Western financial dominance.<sup>2</sup> It was also reported that China and Russia are discussing a new interbank system to replace SWIFT.<sup>3</sup> In March of 2015, additional reports emerged that China's International Payment System (CIPS) will be launched before the end of the year.<sup>4</sup> So, while the "SOFT" in the story is imaginary, the emergence of non-SWIFT banking network(s) from China and Russia appears to be fairly likely.

It is expected that in 2015 India and Pakistan will become full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that currently includes China, Russia, and four other Asian countries. With that, the SCO—that China is positioning as a non-Western inter-regional economic and financial cooperation block—will encompass the vast majority of Asia and close to half of the world's population.

## **Inequality and Shrinking Middle Class**

The American middle class that once was more than half of the country's households has declined to about 40% of the households, mostly due to many falling into poverty. It is projected to continue to decline. Median income has been falling since it peaked in 1999. This is happening despite a growing economy and rising profits—because an increasingly larger share of the wealth flows to the top, especially the upper 0.1%.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-29/u-k-wants-eu-to-block-russia-from-swift-banking-network>

<sup>2</sup> <http://rt.com/business/217803-cbr-swift-alternative-system/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/economy/748916>

<sup>4</sup> <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0M50BV20150309?irpc=932>

In 2014, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman from National Bureau of Economic Research published *Wealth Inequality in the United States since 1913: Evidence from Capitalized Income Tax Data*.<sup>5</sup> Wealth concentration was high early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fell for fifty years, and started rising again thirty-five years ago. While the relative wealth of the top 0.1% tripled, the share of the bottom 90% was cut almost in half. By 2012, these lines intersected: the top 0.1% of the US households had as much wealth as the bottom 90%. The top 0.01%—only 16,000 families—have more wealth than the bottom 130 million families.

Also in 2014, Michael Porter and Jan Rivkin from Harvard Business School published their *The Economy is Doing Half Its Job* study.<sup>6</sup> They found a troubling divergence in the American economy: while large companies and a minority of highly skilled individuals prosper, small businesses and middle- and lower-class individuals are struggling. Their conclusions are blunt: such a divergence is not sustainable.

As mentioned elsewhere in the commentary, extreme economic inequality is proven to lead to political inequality, or “oligarchization” of the political order. Similar, although not as extreme, trends appear in other developed countries. The global inequality is getting worse.<sup>7</sup> The last time such wealth disparity existed was during the 1925 – 1937 period. We all know the upheaval that followed. Perhaps it’s no accident that many hedge fund managers are buying airstrips and farms in remote places, thinking that they need a getaway.<sup>8</sup>

How will the emerging Internet-based and robotics technologies affect the rising inequality? Past industrial revolutions disrupted

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://gabriel-zucman.eu/files/SaezZucman2014.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hbs.edu/competitiveness/Documents/an-economy-doing-half-its-job.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/jan/25/davos-2015-overriding-pessimism-over-growing-inequality>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/jan/23/nervous-super-rich-planning-escapes-davos-2015>

existing economic models but benefited societies in the end. However, there is no guarantee that the outcome of the ongoing technological revolution will be the same. Unlike in earlier economies, in the digital age even a small relative advantage often leads to an absolute domination – “winner-takes-all” markets. So far, the result has been acceleration of inequality: in just the past ten years, the wealth share of the top 0.1% jumped over 50% while that of the bottom 90% dropped by 25%.<sup>9</sup> Technology is bringing about a very different world and the question is whether we’ll adapt our policies to benefit everyone or continue with the status quo where more and more people lose ground and face a possibility of another upheaval. Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee raise these issues, and warn of consequences of not taking action, in their bestselling *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, with their website found at <http://www.secondmachineage.com/>.

### **China’s Ambitions and China – Russia Connection**

China’s ambitions to become a superpower to rival and eventually overcome the United States are well known, as are their plans to make the Renminbi the reserve currency of the world. These issues have been extensively referenced in *The Great Game*.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the US dollar’s reserve currency status can’t be overstated, as it requires other countries to carry the US dollars for international transactions and puts the US into the enviable position of being able to print dollars to pay for tangible goods from abroad. By the same token, both China and Russia expressed desire to remove this advantage from the US by creating trading exchanges based on other currencies.

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://gabriel-zucman.eu/files/SaezZucman2014.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00HGM63II>

Since *The Great Game*'s publication, China has continued promoting use of the Renminbi in global commerce, both by making it one of the five top payment currencies of the world<sup>11</sup> and by concluding multiple bilateral currency swap agreements and establishing Renminbi hubs outside of China.<sup>12</sup>

The future China – Russia alignment was hypothesized in both *The Great Game* and *The Metronome*.<sup>13</sup> This trend has accelerated in 2014, partly driven by geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West and the conflict in Ukraine. A \$456 billion gas deal, cooperation on advanced weapons, high-speed rail, satellite navigation systems, large infrastructure projects, Chinese investments in Russia, the already-mentioned Shanghai Cooperation Organization—they all point to this major Eurasian alliance taking shape quickly.<sup>14</sup>

China has been solidifying its claims to the South China Sea and the East China Sea, conducting land reclamation projects, planning airstrips and harbors, etc. One motivation is vast energy resources in the area.<sup>15 16</sup> But there is also expressed desire to establish these waterways as “Chinese” and put an end to the American domination of the area.

This, in turn, coincides with the Chinese long-stated plans for Taiwan’s “reunification.” This is the most likely flash point for the US – China conflict. In describing Chinese plans for taking Taiwan and the US possible response; some of the references used for this aspect of the book include:

---

11

[http://www.swift.com/about\\_swift/shownews?param\\_dcr=news.data/en/swift.com/2015/PR\\_RMB\\_into\\_the\\_top\\_five.xml](http://www.swift.com/about_swift/shownews?param_dcr=news.data/en/swift.com/2015/PR_RMB_into_the_top_five.xml)

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internationalization\\_of\\_the\\_renminbi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internationalization_of_the_renminbi)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00MVL62MQ>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cnbc.com/id/102106704>, among many other sources

<sup>15</sup> <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Asia/The-Great-South-China-Sea-Hydrocarbon-Grab.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/China-Strengthening-Claim-To-South-China-Sea-Oil-And-Gas.html>

“The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles,”  
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1478268875>, 2012

“Air-Sea Battle,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment,  
<http://csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>,  
2010

“Hard ROC2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence Through Protraction,”  
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment,  
<http://csbaonline.org/publications/2014/12/hard-roc-2-0-taiwan-and-deterrence-through-protraction/>, 2014

## Surveillance

Some of you may have seen *The Minority Report* directed by Steven Spielberg.<sup>17</sup> In the year 2054, criminals are apprehended before they have a chance to commit a crime and people’s movements are continually tracked in order to advertise to them and keep them under surveillance. While *pre-crime* does not look feasible anytime soon, potential for the constant surveillance has almost arrived. As alluded here, the surveillance has both business (“to sell you things”) and security (“to make sure you don’t do bad things”) components. But these components are not entirely separate as businesses routinely share the information they collect with the government:

“Thousands of technology, finance and manufacturing companies are working closely with U.S. national security agencies, providing sensitive information and in return receiving benefits that include access to classified intelligence...”<sup>18</sup>

“Microsoft has collaborated closely with US intelligence services to allow users’ communications to be intercepted, including helping the National Security Agency to circumvent the company’s own encryption...”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0181689/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-06-14/u-s-agencies-said-to-swap-data-with-thousands-of-firms>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/11/microsoft-nsa-collaboration-user-data>

And many more.

Anything you do with Google-provided services (search, e-mail, maps, etc.) will be combined into targeted advertising. This is not to single out Google – all companies are trying to collect as much information about you as they can. Google just happens to be, by and large, better at it.

The government snoops on phone, email and text records of virtually every US citizen—with the forced cooperation of US telecommunications companies. The PBS program *United States of Secrets* describes how the government spies on its citizens and how technology companies feed into the dragnet.<sup>20</sup> According to some of the NSA technologists interviewed by PBS, it was possible to protect the privacy of the citizens by anonymizing the data—however, the NSA chose not to do this.

In 2007, there were estimated 30 million surveillance cameras in the US. The number is certainly much higher now. The size of the smart surveillance and video analytics global market is estimated at \$13.5 billion in 2012; it's expected to reach \$39 billion by 2020.<sup>21</sup> But now, we are coming to the Age of the “Internet of Things,” where internet-connected devices will monitor every aspect of the environment. By 2024, the setting of this story, there will be billions of internet-devices that people wear or have in their homes. Iris scanners, as portrayed in *The Minority Report*, are being built into inexpensive devices including smartphones. “See-through-clothing” terahertz imaging, which is already familiar from airport security checkpoints, is coming to police scanners near you.

These will make our lives more convenient and possibly safer. They will also destroy whatever little remains of our privacy as the data they collect will add to the giant pool of information that will be

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/united-states-of-secrets/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://fortune.com/2013/04/26/the-great-surveillance-boom/>

collected and analyzed in order to sell you things, to protect you and—if needed—to bring you to justice. But what would be so bad about increased convenience and protection? Well, if you are an average American you commit three felonies per day<sup>22</sup>—unwittingly, of course. Life is complex, technologies changing fast, the laws don't always keep up. There is no place to hide; under constant surveillance, everyone is a criminal.

This does not mean that the government is an evil, ill-intentioned force, ready to strike at you. That's not the point. Every government always asked its citizens to trust it without question because it has the country's goodwill at heart. But even best intentions do not guarantee good results. If there is one maxim that held through the ages, it's that power corrupts. And giving someone ability to completely track our lives is to hand them an enormous power. Privacy is precious because it's integral to liberty. Is free speech even possible in the absence of privacy? We would be well advised to remember what Benjamin Franklin said 260 years ago: "Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." And would likely lose both.

---

22

# **MAIN CHARACTERS OF THE TRILOGY**

Characters are arranged alphabetically by first name.

### Alejandro

A friend and associate of Oleg Khmelco and a member of a prominent Mexican mafia family, Alejandro helps David and Maggie to escape their pursuers in *The Great Game*. Alejandro serves as their host when they return to Los Angeles in 2024 in *The Outer Circle*. His intentions towards Maggie are not entirely innocent.

### Boris Mosin

The Russian President in 2024. When becoming aware of the Chinese plans to retake Taiwan, faces the choice of continuing to play a second fiddle in the alliance with China or taking a more independent position.

### Brian Tice

The US Vice President in 2024. Trails both Dimon and Kron in the electoral campaign.

### David Ferguson

Computer engineer and an innocent bystander that in *The Great Game* gets caught up in a struggle between superpowers. Together with Margarita (Maggie) Sappin, he ends up searching for the “Schulmann file” (research into insider trading behind the 2019 financial crisis). David and Maggie end up publishing decoded parts of the “Schulmann file” in 2022 and go on the run to Mexico. Together with Maggie, David returns to the US in 2024 in *The Outer Circle* following the discovery of additional names, in particular that of John Dimon, a leading presidential candidate.

### David Weinstein

Son of Anya Weinstein. Anya was Pavel Rostin's girlfriend before Pavel met Karen Baker. Anya helps Pavel in *The Metronome*. Thanks to the money that Pavel left his mother, David is able to come to study to the US. In *The Outer Circle*, he gets involved in Jeff Kron's campaign and helps with the information that David Ferguson and Maggie Sappin bring.

### Ivan Mershov

A Russian military officer, Ivan meets Pavel Rostin in *The Metronome* because Ivan's father was friends with Pavel's father. Ivan is an uncle of Oleg Khmelco. By *The Outer Circle*, Ivan rises to be the head of SOBR, the Special Rapid Response Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Through Vitaly Mershov, Oleg reaches to him for help.

### Jeff Kron

At the beginning of *The Metronome*, Jeff is serving a life sentence for the murder of John Brockton, a murder he did not commit, although he did blame Brockton's financial shenanigans for destroying his family. Jeff gets released thanks to Pavel Rostin. He ends up marrying Jennifer. Jeff gets involved in politics and becomes a prominent politician.

### Jennifer Rostin-Kron

Daughter of Pavel Rostin and Karen Baker. Jennifer marries Jeff Kron, the man who'd been released from jail thanks to her father. Supports Jeff in his political activities, she herself becomes a prominent political figure in *The Outer Circle*.

### Jim Brobak

First appears in *The Great Game* as the head of the FBI's Dallas office. His friend John Platt helps David Ferguson and Maggie Sappin to find the Schulmann file. Brobak assists them with escaping

pursuit. John Platt is killed and Jim Brobak gets demoted to a regional office in New Mexico. In *The Outer Circle*, Brobak helps David Ferguson to gain access to the data on John Dimon that David had been searching for.

### Joe Maxwell

The outgoing US President in 2024. Faces the choice of either supporting his VP or a representative of a third party.

### John Dimon

A populist American politician and a frontrunner in the 2024 election.

### Jonathan Schulmann

Appears indirectly in *The Great Game*. The SEC attorney that investigated the financial crisis of 2019 and discovered planning and participation by high-ranking figures from China, Russia, the US, and other countries. He was assassinated on Nemzhov's orders. His file survived thanks to Suzy Yamamoto.

### Kai Liu

As the Chinese Premier in 2024, he faces difficult problems with a restless population. In favor of taking a military action to retake Taiwan, but only if the chances for success against the US Navy are overwhelming.

### Karen Baker

Sam Baker's daughter and the mother of Jennifer Rostin-Kron. She fell in love with and married Pavel Rostin in *The Metronome*. The marriage began falling apart under stress from Pavel's business venture failing. Acts as a support for Jennifer in *The Outer Circle*.

### Margarita Sappin

Appears first in *The Great Game*, when David Ferguson accidentally involves her in searching for the “Schulmann file.” David and Maggie become lovers, publish the file and escape together. They both return to the US in *The Outer Circle* to expose a dangerous politician.

### Nikolai Nemzhov

In *The Metronome*, Nikolai is a colonel of the FSB that is involved in clandestine financial operations abroad. Pavel Rostin comes across Nemzhov when investigating his father’s death. Nemzhov attempts to manipulate Rostin in order to gain access to Sam Baker. When this fails, Nemzhov eliminates Rostin. In *The Great Game*, Nemzhov is the head of the GRU and one of the driving figures behind the attack on the US dollar in 2019. He tries to manipulate Ferguson and Sappin into not releasing the data. When that fails, Nemzhov is forced to run. He retails powerful resources, both information and financial, that he uses in *The Outer Circle* in an attempt to seize power and more.

### Oleg Khmelco

Briefly appears in *The Metronome* where, while still a teenager, he meets Pavel Rostin. Originally from St. Petersburg, Oleg comes to the US to work as a bodyguard for a Russian mafia figure. When people pursuing David Ferguson kill his friend in *The Great Game*, Oleg gets involved with David and Maggie. With the help of his friend and associate Alejandro, Oleg helps David and Maggie escape to Mexico. In *The Outer Circle*, Oleg joins David and Maggie in coming back to the US.

### Pavel Rostin

The main character of *The Metronome*, a Russian physicist that married Karen Baker and left academia for the Wall Street. In investigating the death of his father Vladimir, he comes across the

plot behind the murder of John Brockton, a financier that had been active in Russia during the *perestroika* years. Pavel's actions lead to release of Jeff Kron, who'd been mistakenly jailed for Brockton's murder. Unknown to Pavel, he's been all along manipulated by Nikolai Nemzhov in order to gain access to Sam Baker, Pavel's father-in-law. When Pavel refuses to cooperate he gets killed, with his murder staged as a suicide.

### Robert Treadwell

A prominent media figure, Treadwell is blackmailed by Nemzhov into supporting John Dimon for president.

### Sam Baker

Prominent US congressman, father of Karen Baker, grandfather of Jennifer Rostin-Kron. Retired from politics in 2022. Helps David Ferguson and Maggie Sappin to expose John Dimon.

### Sarah Shoffman

Pavel Rostin's lover in *The Metronome*; she appears briefly in *The Outer Circle*.

### Suzy Yamamoto

In *The Metronome*, Suzy helps Pavel Rostin to investigate the financial mystery surrounding his father's death. She appears indirectly in *The Great Game* as the person that saved Jonathan Schulmann's research in an online storage service that David Ferguson and Margarita Sappin discover.

### Vitaly Mershov

Ivan's son. He first appears in *The Metronome* as a friend of Oleg Khmelco. In *The Outer Circle*, he is a *militzia* investigator that comes

across suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of the Russian Minister of Defense. Reaches out to his father Ivan for help and gets involved in untangling the Nemzhov-directed coup.

### Yuriy Shelkov

A senior Russian military officer that is blackmailed by Nemzhov into supporting the coup attempt. He becomes the Russian Minister of Defense following assassination of his predecessor.

### Wu Cao

A senior Chinese military officer that is planning a military action against Taiwan.